

## The Universe Pays its Debts

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by [Theresalwaysamystery](#)

### Summary

Lance gets out of the healing pod, the Voltron fam is back together-- Enter: Complications. The toxin that Lance and Keith were exposed to is the gift that keeps on giving, Pidge watched some videos she really shouldn't have, and Allura needs to stop keeping secrets. Lance and Keith are dealing with a lot and everyone just wants to help out. Predictably, its gonna be more than anyone bargained for. Guys they need hugs. Can we just give them all hugs??

### Notes

Halla :)

Sorry this took so long to get out!

To anyone who have stuck with this despite my... unplanned hiatus, I love you, and i'm so glad you enjoyed Lost Boys enough to come back for more!

For anyone stumbling on this for the first time- I do recommend reading pt 1 first- although if you don't -please let me know what you think of this as a solo piece? I'm always eager for comments and to hear new perspectives

I will do my best to note down any potential triggers at the beginning of each chapter.

Just a timeline note- I started writing this before Season 3 even came out- and i can't bear to change all of it to fit with current cannon. Some things i will modify, but for the most part think of this as an AU that splits off from the End of Season 2. If you want further clarification or have questions just shoot me a message.

For those to whom it matters, This piece has already been written in its entirety, no worries about it being left unfinished. It's the editing that is taking up my time. :-P On that note though, I hope to get a chapter up at least once every two weeks.

Many thanks to those that kept pushing me to work on this, and who helped to edit/beta it/tell me i was an idiot for not giving my readers context. (I get that one the most): Lauren, Dragon\_Stone, Maddie, and psychosei this one's for you. (look- you DID get something for valentines day :-P) Love you guys lots.

As always, Kudos and Comments are a writer's life blood. <3

Now without further adieu, I give you Pidge being badass. Also known as Ch1.

# Chapter 1

(Edited on the 16th for purely formatting reasons-- It should read a little prettier now :D )

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Pidge kicked her heels loudly against the side of the console that she sat atop of. The others were waiting for Lance; he was due to come out of the pod any minute now. As much as she wanted to be there for him—she really did—she also knew she wouldn't be able to bear it. The others would see the deception in her face, they would know she had found something strange and hadn't told them about it. She didn't have it in her to lie to her family right now.

The horrible feeling in the pit of her stomach was only made worse when she accepted the fact that she didn't have all the facts. She was no help to anyone like this, all hyped up on exhaustion, frayed nerves, and half-truths. She wasn't sure about what she'd found, and she hated being so uncertain, but no one would *tell* her anything. She couldn't tell the other Paladins because she didn't want them to worry if there really was nothing to worry about. Then again, she didn't know for sure that there *was* nothing to worry about. She *had* to find out, get the solid facts that she loved so much. She *needed* to talk to Allura.

Her heels continued their assault on the console. *Thud thud. Thud thud.*

Sitting on her hands, she started to nibble on her lower lip. Nail-biting was not a habit she needed to pick back up in space; Lance already got on her case about chewing on her hair, and fidgeting with her 'glasses'.

She looked forward to having him badger her again.

She also hoped he appreciated the effort that she'd made to not chew on her extremities despite his absence.

*Thud thud. Thud thud.*

Her hunches were normally spot on, she just wasn't sure about this...

When Lance had first gone into the pod, Coran had come to her with a theory, not knowing the something about adjusting the pods so that a tablet could be used as an interface, even across the castle, as a way to keep an eye on the occupants without being in the infirmary itself.

That had been easy- really, it was a wonder the Alteans hadn't already had such a system in place. She'd mentioned as much, and Coran had said something about privacy matters; which she understood. It would be a lot easier to nefariously hack into any of their medical files once she linked up the pods to the castle's internal wireless network- but there were only the seven of them living here; plus the mice. Add to that the fact that five of them regularly shared thoughts, there wasn't much reason to keep that information so restricted. The Paladins had quickly learnt how to respect the few boundaries they still had. The important ones at least.

*Thud thud. Thud thud.*

Besides, she'd yet to meet anyone who was able to crack her firewalls.

Pidge and Coran had then tested the program. She'd hooked up her tablet to the pods through the network, and had been able to successfully see the live data stream coming from Lance's pod wherever she went in the castle.

What had confused her, though?, was that the data she'd received couldn't possibly be right. The data was different- changed somehow, and definitely not the readings you'd expect to see coming off a human being.

Coran had assured her it was because the pod was in the middle of a healing sequence, and that the toxin had slightly disrupted the systems. They were simply getting faulty readings, he explained. Lance was fine.

The expression on Coran's face hadn't been quite innocent enough for Pidge to buy his story. Not to mention she knew that if they were in fact 'faulty readings', Coran would have had her double check the system to make sure those faults weren't simply a consequence of her dabbling with the program's code. He hadn't asked her for that double check, so the only thing she could do was assume that he had information that she was lacking. Information, that told him the readings were in fact, not faulty. Information, that he was clearly unwilling, or unable to share with her.

Katie'd double-checked, triple-checked, just to be sure. Then she'd dug on her own, keeping a constant eye on Lance's stats, (of all of the paladins, she didn't think Lance would mind,) and used her quickly growing knowledge of Altean to pillage the Castle's database for other records of strange readings in the past.

The data from Lance's pod had mostly straightened itself out over the next day. Still, the numbers that she was seeing... they weren't quite *right*, and she was worried that that meant Lance wouldn't be quite *right*. The thought terrified her.

*Thud thud. Thud thud.*

Coran kept saying things like: 'the odd readings you're seeing is probably just the result of Lance being a Paladin with a magical mind link to a mechanical lion!', or 'the technology is 10,000 years old after all, it's allowed to jitter and slide a bump!'. She was seriously considering zapping him with her Bayard. He must think she's an *idiot*. Of *course* she knew that all of their Brain scans had changed after finding, and bonding with their lions. She also knew how to take that data into consideration, and she knew that the abnormalities she was seeing with Lance's medical results was something else entirely.

*Thud thud. Thud thud.*

Using several key words, and the little data she did have to create search parameters, Pidge'd written a little search program. It hadn't taken long to find the old Altean medical files, with medical reports that could have come straight from a movie.

*Thud thud. Thud thud.*

That was why she wanted to talk to Allura. She needed someone to either straight out confirm or deny her findings. Cornering the princess was about the only option she had left.

*Thud thud. Thud thud.*

Katie needed to know what was happening to Lance. It could be nothing-

*Thud thud. Thud thud.*

-but at the same time it could be everything

*Thud thud. Thud thud.*

---

Allura wasn't surprised at all to find a frustrated, and somewhat offended Green Paladin waiting for her on the bridge. From Pidge's actions, and questions of late, Allura would be lying if she said she hadn't been expecting this ambush.

"Allura-" Pidge started as she entered the room.

"Hold on one tick," Allura interrupted, closing, and then locking the doors to the bridge. She didn't want to be caught off guard by another Paladin.

Pidge's eyes widened when she realized what Allura was doing.

"There," Allura said as she finished, and leant calmly against the console across from the Green Paladin. "Now we can safely talk. Oh! And Coran said that he'd save us some of Hunk's feast."

Pidge's stomach grumbled at the mention of food, and Allura smiled softly in sympathy. There would be no food goo tonight: Hunk had scoured their supplies, even taken a trip down to a nearby planet in search of anything he could use in celebration of Lance's, (and Keith's,) recovery. Allura knew it would be amazing, as it always was.

"Lance," Pidge asked hesitantly, "is he... doing okay?"

Nodding slowly, Allura spoke. "I don't know if Keith is ever going to forgive him for almost breaking his promise and leaving Keith alone," Shiro had said as much and Allura agreed with his assessment, "but Lance is doing well."

Pidge nodded nervously, then not wanting to prolong the issue any longer, handed Allura her tablet. "Here."

The princess reached out, and sighed apprehensively as she read through what Pidge had pulled up. It was- more intense than she'd been expecting, Pidge was certainly thorough in her investigations.

"Explain that to me, please?" Pidge asked quietly. "When it talks about neural pathways and electrical impulses, I get that. I get that and what it says scares me." Pidge took a deep breath. "The-the parts where it talks about altering Quintessence though... Allura please tell me I've got this all wrong, tell me he's going to be fine."

"I can tell you that he appears to be recovering well; and due to the simple detail that he's human- rather than Altean, it is my hope that circumstances such as these will not come to pass. Pidge, please remember that although the reports that you read are indeed alarming, by no means does it mean that the outcome they illustrate is a certainty. The odds-"

"Are high," Pidge interrupted, and Allura frowned. "Don't even try to tell me otherwise," The Green Paladin continued. "When the individual in question has been exposed to high amounts of quintessence in the past? Like the quintessence that a Paladin is exposed to constantly? Then the odds are even worse. And if you consider the fact that Lance was exposed to the toxin steadily over the course of almost a month, and the torture he endured-" Pidge gulped, "with the side effect of

added adrenaline, and then the sedative we gave him—Allura, the odds-.”

“He spoke with Blue,” Allura offered desperately, a last ditched effort to stop Pidge in her tracks, and hopefully avoid further confrontation on the subject. It only half worked.

“He- wait, really?” Pidge looked up with the first semblance of relief in her eyes since Allura had walked into the room.

Allura nodded slowly. “It was one of the first things we checked when he got out of the pod.”

“So- he’s fine then?” Pidge seemed nervous to even say it.

The Princess smiled nervously. “It seems so. Theoretically there- well there could still be other side effects, but I’m hopeful- as his bond with his lion is unaffected, that little else will come of the toxin.”

“Well, why didn’t you just say that to start with?”

“I wasn’t aware I needed to,” Allura hedged, knowing it wouldn’t fly with the intelligent Paladin. She’d wanted to see how much Pidge knew before she said anything more. It wouldn’t have done to worry her further by giving her details she didn’t already have. There was no need to be concerned about that now though, Pidge had found all there was to find on Lance’s situation, and it seemed, perhaps even more.

“Right.” Pidge frowned, and called her bluff. “So then, if it’s no big deal, why have you been avoiding me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about” Allura lied, and she had a little trouble maintaining eye contact as Pidge’s piercing gaze bore through her.

“Yeah, you do. You’ve been avoiding me—and this topic—for days. Ever since I found out something was wrong, you’ve always had somewhere more important to be, and you wouldn’t let Coran tell me anything either.

Allura bit her lip. Everything Pidge said was true- but she didn’t understand. Allura had been trying to avoid this whole ordeal.

Knowing wouldn’t do them any good—

There was nothing that the Paladins could—

Their knowledge of this would do absolutely nothing to improve the situation.

Pidge continued, oblivious to Allura’s internal rationalization of her earlier decisions.

“Lance could have lost his connection to Blue because of this; and you didn’t think that we, his fellow Paladins, had a right to know? What if that connection *had* been affected? Do you think that any of us would have been okay knowing that we could have tried to help, that we might have been able to do something, but you just didn’t think it was important enough to tell us?”

*Not just Lance*, Allura thought, but she’d never say that, it was her final secret in a vain effort to protect them. She kept her voice firm as she lied through her teeth. “Pidge. There was absolutely no way to know if Lance would suffer any ill effects due to the toxin after emerging from the pod. I thought everyone had enough to worry about without adding this to their bowls.”

“Plates,” Pidge automatically corrected. “And that doesn’t mean you get to decide what information we are allowed to have. It ended badly when you didn’t tell us what we needed to

know about Zarkon, what made you think that this was any different?"

"It is my job to care for the Paladins of Voltron as best I see fit. I saw fit to keep this to myself."

Pidge frowned. "No, that's not good enough. We had a *right* to know as soon as you did. Lance has a right to know *now*. Are you going to tell him?"

"If it affects his responsibilities as a Paladin, I suppose I'll have to--"

"Wrong answer. Yes, you will tell him." Pidge instructed.

"Paladin!" Allura scolded, trying to appeal to the duty of the warrior rather than the heart of the girl, but the Green Paladin simply brushed her tone away. Allura should have realized, should have remembered that family *always* came first for Pidge, it always had. It was just unfortunate that Pidge couldn't see that protecting her family; *their* family, was exactly what Allura was trying to do.

"No. You *are* going to tell him. You're going to tell everyone."

"Pidge--"

"And don't think I missed the little detail you've been avoiding, that Keith may have also been affected."

*Quiznack.*

"I just haven't had an excuse to gather the data I need to confirm it. I will as soon as I get the chance, and when I find out, I *will* tell Keith what I've found," she threatened. "Unless you've already told them, Allura, I will."

There was a long pause.

"Paladin, please be reasonable."

"Oh, you're one to talk. I get that you have a lot going on, but you're not the only one. We almost lost Shiro for good- and then right after that whole ordeal, Lance and Keith were kidnapped from us for nearly a month. Those were not fun times Allura, for any of us. So- fill me in. What's going on? Did you just not think we could handle it?"

"Now Pidge--"

"No, you know what?" Pidge interrupted, "Never mind. Even if you had lost faith in us, that doesn't give you the right to keep things like this to yourself."

"I *never* lost faith," Allura said coldly, "I never once lost faith in you. Never lost faith that you could fight the endless battles, never lost faith that you would find each other. Never. I promise you that."

Pidge stared for a moment, judging, evaluating with her calculated gaze before finally nodding.

"Fine. I do believe you, but you'd better have a darn good reason for what you've done when you explain this all later to the others."

"I don't suppose you'd consider-" *keeping this between us for a while?* As she saw the hostile expression that began to emerge on Pidge's face, she opted to keep the end to herself.

"Nope. It's your castle, your war, your tech. But this is my family. It's their health, and something

like this is *never* your call to make. They deserve to know. All of them. All of *us*.”

The silence was far too long to be amiable, or comfortable. “Alright,” Allura agreed at last, her voice small. It wasn’t what she’d wanted- but she couldn’t risk the faith of the Paladins any more than she clearly had. This was not how things were supposed to be; and for the thousandth time, she wished that she could ask for her father’s advice.

“Good.” Pidge fidgeted nervously, sitting on her hands to avoid biting them. “You have until lunch tomorrow. And Princess?”

Allura dipped her head slightly in acknowledgement, knowing she really had no other choice. The Green Paladin really was a force to be reckoned with.

“Allura? Don’t ever try to lie to me again. What you did? You may not realize it yet, but that hurt my family—and I don’t like it when my family is hurt.” Pidge narrowed her eyes for a cold moment, then jumped down off the console and headed towards the door, unlocking it from her tablet as she walked.

“Now, you said something about food?”

Allura nodded weakly.

“C’mon then. If we hurry, we might not be too late.”



## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

Oh no.

What had he missed?

### Chapter Notes

So it's a short one, but it's also mostly Shiro. It used to be longer i swear but the timelines didnt work and this chapter ended up... well, short.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY SHIRO! <3

You guys are amazing, thank you so much for dropping by, and reading, and kudos-ing, and commenting!

It makes my day every time!

Thanks to my beta; Dragon\_Stone. To Lauren for putting up with HOW LONG THIS FIC HAS TAKEN TO GET POSTED ;), and to Maddie for being my last minute sounding board. <3 <3

Psychosei, it has been too long since we chilled.

Warnings: Mentions of Nightmares, PTSD, and some slight allusions to torture?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

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Shiro was more relaxed than he had been in weeks. After three days of waiting anxiously, Lance was finally out of the healing pod. There was no residual trace of the Toxin, and all traces of injury and the complications thereof were gone. He was fine.

The Black Paladin had all of his charges both back on the ship, and healthy. For the past month, he'd been too scared to even dream of this outcome, let alone plan the next step-should it ever come to pass.

That was exactly the point he was at though, and it seemed too good to be true. While Lance had been in the pod he'd started cursory thoughts on building living schedules that incorporated time to heal as well as time to train. Shiro had to think about when was the right time to try and form

Voltron again- the pros and cons to forming it sooner, versus later. He'd borrowed Katie's Laptop- (*of course* she had all of her Garrison textbooks downloaded onto it) and he'd been going over various, (although simplistic) treatments, for the plethora of things that Lance and Keith had gone through. He'd started to think about what had worked with him, personally, and what had worked with Keith in the past, and things he'd seen in his own experience as a member of the Garrison, and a prisoner of the Galra. He'd even approached Coran and asked him about traditional Altean treatments, although the Redhead had been a little skittish on the topic at first, they'd come out with a decent conversation, and a fair amount of Ideas.

He'd also been reading up on some of what had really come to pass in that month when Keith and Lance had been gone, when he'd been little more than a walking wreck of himself. Shiro had let them down so much during that time period, and he knew he needed to more than make up for it by being there for them all now.

Shiro was just starting to get worried about Katie and Allura's lack of presence at the dining room when Katie tumbled through the doorway, crashing into Lance with a hug from behind.

There was a moment of startled silence and abruptly defensive movements, before Lance really registered what was going on. "Pidgely!" Lance greeted her loudly, turning around in his seat to return the hug. "Where ya been?"

"Stuff," was her muffled response as she buried her face in his chest. "Missed you."

"I missed ya too, midget."

Lance ruffled her hair, and- squawking- she seamlessly wedged herself on the bench between Lance and Hunk; Shiro noted that she didn't even consider sitting between Lance and Keith. He stifled a chuckle at the expression on Hunk's face as the Yellow Paladin realized what had just happened, and Shiro offered him a small smirk of condolences. Hunk grumbled but satisfied himself with a halfhearted glare in her direction interspersed with the occasional disgruntled poke, (Which she ignored as only a younger sibling could,). Katie made grabby hands at one of the plates of food Coran had set aside, and Shiro slid it across the table to her from his seat next to the royal advisor.

"So? Spill," Lance prompted her as he brought another large sporkful of something fuchsia to his mouth. "It had to have been *really* interesting for you to miss meeting me out of the pod."

Shiro couldn't help it. He wanted to be absolutely sure that Lance was back at 100%, and so he was paying closer attention than he normally would have, and it meant that Shiro heard the distinct *need* in the Blue Paladin's tone. Shiro might have missed it if the past month hadn't been spent trying to find both Keith and Lance, and if the past few days hadn't been spent almost *losing* Lance. There was a need in his voice for Katie's fascinating technology to be the reason she had missed greeting him rather than, well something else.

Oh Lance. Shiro really hoped that Lance didn't believe that Katie would have chosen to miss his exit from the pod without a very, *very* good reason.

"Yeah, I haven't seen you much around the Castle lately, Pidge," Hunk added, and Lance's posture noticeably softened. "Is everything ok?"

"Me? Yeah, I'm fine."

The Paladins looked at her expectantly, and Shiro noticed Coran shift his attention firmly to his plate. Interesting.

“I-Well-“ she continued, reluctant, when they clearly weren’t going to let it go. “I’ve just been helping Coran out with some of the internal sensor recalibrations. To take my mind off of... everything else? Just took my brain a little too far is all.” She shrugged.

Shiro frowned. He knew that tone, Matt sounded the exact same when he was trying to avoid something. “Pidge?” he said softly, “You know you can talk to us, right?”

The look in her eyes was broken as she glanced up at him, and his gut clenched. “Yeah, I know Shiro. And-“ she sighed, “And I will. Just- not right now. Okay?”

Shiro nodded slowly. “If you’re sure.”

She quickly gave him a single nod back, a quick jerk of the head, and that seemed to be enough for the rest of the Paladins. Something still didn’t sit quite right with Shiro, but he respected Katie’s decision; he trusted that she’d share what was bothering her when the time was right. For now, he satisfied himself by watching his team dig into their first meal together in weeks.

Hunk was thrilled to have his best friend finally safe and healthy, a smile on his face as Lance jokingly threatened to disorganize his spices if he didn’t agree to help the Blue Paladin set up some sort of sound system in the lounge- as if Hunk would have disagreed in the first place. They had all agreed early on that as perfect as the Castle’s sound system was, some Earth music seemed to lose its heart when piped through it. No one had had enough down time to really do anything about it yet, so Lance was taking this opportunity to optimize on their forced rest.

Shiro had also heard something about a sleepover, but Lance was always able to find an excuse for one of those. He’d let them plan it, Shiro thought, and surprise him later with the idea. It would be worth almost anything to see their smiles, and to give them some semblance of normalcy for a moment or two.

Shiro continued his silent observations, noting Keith as he pushed some food around on his plate, inspecting it before eating a small forkful. Keith simply looked glad to be where he was. On the Castle, with his family again. No one could deny that he looked exhausted, but also more than content that Lance was alive and well sitting next to him. Shiro and Keith would have to have a talk at some point, a real one, about his flashbacks and panic attacks, but for now things were all right.

A startled movement- or lack thereof caught Shiro’s attention as Katie froze where she sat. Coran’s glance to the head of the table barely a second later was filled with concern, and Shiro followed their gazes to see a nervous Allura.

Oh no.

What had he missed?

“Allura!” Lance cheered, breaking Shiro from his thoughts, “you almost missed the party!”

Allura smiled stiffly, “My apologies Lance. There was a matter that required my attention.”

Katie bristled slightly, but Lance didn’t seem to notice.

“Oh, all right!” He allowed easily. Lance was always too kind, Shiro thought, much kinder than they often deserved, and he hoped that Allura had a good enough reason for worrying him.

“Check out what Hunk put together!” Lance invited as Allura sat, gesturing at the plates and spread in front of them eagerly.

“It certainly does look- delicious, Hunk.” Allura nodded at their resident chef with a hesitant smile, “Might I ask what we have the pleasure of consuming?” she asked as she took her seat across from him at the table.

Hunk’s eyes lit up, indulging Allura’s curiosity with streams of descriptors before she could even fill up her plate. As he spoke, the table naturally broke off into their own conversations.

Lance was trying too hard, and Keith wasn’t trying at all, but at least they were there. Shiro knew it might be difficult, and sometimes uneasy for team Voltron as they tried to find their rhythm again, but at least it was a start.

---

The Paladins spent the night in one of the sunken lounges, at Lance’s behest. As Shiro looked around, he smiled to himself. Hunk was spread out flat with Katie curled up on one side using his arm as a pillow, and Lance curled up around the other. Shiro wasn’t sure Lance could get much closer to Hunk without touching him, but having painfully watched him slowly edge himself away from his human pillow over the past hour or so in his sleep, Shiro simply wanted the boy to feel comfortable. Keith slept on the other side of Lance, curled up tight -with the exception of one arm that was outstretched and holding Lance’s as they slept.

Shiro had chosen to sleep on one of the couches, rather than in the pit between them. He wanted to avoid waking up the other paladins by his occasionally violent nightmares, if he could. From his perch, he was also close enough that he could ruffle both Lance, or Keith’s hair from above if either he wanted, or needed to.

A few hours into the night, Lance started to mumble and twitch. Shiro gently shifted his weight on the couch so that he would be able to wake Lance if need be; or to hold him down- as he knew from personal experience was sometimes- unfortunately- unavoidable.

Shiro had expected something like this. Nightmares. He’d been ready for them. He just hadn’t expected *this*.

He hadn’t thought Keith was even awake when the Red Paladin pulled Lance closer to him. Shiro watched silently as his younger brother pulled the shaking Blue Paladin into his arms, muttered soft words and rubbed Lance’s back soothingly as Lance cried silent tears into his pillow. Lance’s breathing evened out and Shiro listened as both he and Keith fell back to sleep.

Shiro, ever the light sleeper, watched them again, an hour later when their positions reversed. He found himself both pained and proud in his place as an onlooker, in the rare position where his assistance wasn’t only not wanted, but not even anticipated.

It was good that they had each other, Shiro told himself that as he tried to fall asleep. What wasn’t so good, was how Lance shied away from Hunk’s touch, how he flinched when Katie gave him a hug, how he froze when Shiro patted his shoulder, (Which he had since stopped doing). What wasn’t good was how Keith didn’t seem to know what to do with himself when Lance wasn’t around; how he looked to check on Lance before every decision he made, how he hesitated- rather than trust his instincts.

It was still early days yet; Shiro told himself, they had only just gotten them back. There would be time to heal, but he knew they needed help, professional help, and they deserved better than him. Unfortunately he was all they had.

Right then, he silently swore that he would do right by them and it quickly became his nighttime oath. If nothing else in his life amounted to anything, he would have this, he would do right by them. Keith, Lance, Katie and Hunk. He would do right by all of them.

## Chapter End Notes

If there is anything you guys really want to see in this series shoot me a line? Either here or on tumblr (iwouldntmissitfortheworld); I really need to get started on part 3 but am finding myself significantly lacking in motivation... :-O

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Summary

“What kind of friend am I?”

“The sort of friend that hurts to see their friend in pain, and doesn’t want to hurt them more by letting them witness the hurt their hurt caused.”

### Chapter Notes

So this is late. I know, i’m sorry. Blame it on a combination of tooth troubles, cosplay distractions, and one hell of a busy schedule :-P

Thanks to the people putting up with me and my lack of organizational skills- anyone who’s come back to read this, to my beautiful beta, Dragon\_stone; and to Lauren and Maddie for your sass. You are all amazing :D

Psychosei i hope you enjoy the slight fluff in this chapter. I promise I tried.

(If you think you’re seeing or understanding references that are wierdly obscure—you’re not crazy. Shout outs in this chapter to RWBY and several to SG1- <3)

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Morning came slowly and suddenly; neither of them had slept much. Although Lance was pretty sure that they hadn’t woken Pidge or Hunk with their late night- difficulties, the same couldn’t be said for Shiro. There was something different in the Black Paladin’s gaze, and although he didn’t say a word- actually Shiro didn’t seem to act any differently at all- Lance could *feel* the subtle shift in attention.

Hunk and Pidge tried to sneak out before the others ‘woke up’, soft comments ripping across the room; ‘Shuushh’ and ‘breakfast in bed’ and ‘what Coran doesn’t know won’t hurt him’, with quiet giggles that warmed the occupants. Even if they *hadn’t* wanted a slight bit more privacy, Pidge and Hunk’s excitement was enough for he and Keith both to continue their charade of peaceful sleep.

Shiro left a little while later, muttering something about the training deck. He gave the two of them a nod as he left the room, and they were alone for the first real time since Lance had come out of the healing pod.

“He knows.” Lance whispered as he sat up, pulling his knees into to his chest, and wrapping his arms around his legs.

Pulling himself up, Keith nodded, crossing his legs as he sat across from the Blue Paladin. “Shiro doesn’t sleep much either.”

“I know,” Lance admitted, “I just...”

“Didn’t think it would be this bad?” Keith finished softly.

Lance shook his head, eyes glistening. “I thought I was stronger than that- I thought that if I wasn’t alone—“

Keith reached out to take Lance’s hands gently in his own. The brunette crumpled forward at the contact, burying his head between his knees as he tried desperately to choke back his feelings.

“I know, Lance, I get it.”

They stayed like that until Lance looked up, bleary eyed, to meet Keith’s sad eyes from under his lashes.

“I thought so too,” Keith finished, his voice barely above a whisper.

Lance sighed, and flipped his hand around so that he could give Keith’s hand a squeeze of solidarity. “It’ll get better, won’t it?” he asked shyly, his voice rough.

Keith shrugged “It needs to. We’re useless to Voltron if we can’t even sleep through the night.”

“Voltron,” Lance said hesitantly. “Are you worried?”

“Yes,” Keith said simply, “about forming it, but also—“

“about having them in our ‘head-holes’.” Lance finished.

Keith nodded.

“How does Shiro do it?”

Shrugging, Keith fidgeted with the hem of his shirt.

Lance nodded, filling in the blanks himself with ease, “Yeah, I guess he still doesn’t remember much. And what he does remember—“

“He’s good at protecting us from it.” Keith finished.

Lance sighed. “Well, I get why now. I didn’t understand- no, I guess I didn’t *want* to understand why he keeps us out as much as he does. I just wanted to help him so badly—but, I get it now.” He swallowed, and bit his lip before continuing. “I don’t want anyone in my head either. I don’t want them to get *hurt*.”

Keith nodded, he got it. Better, was that Lance knew that he got it, he didn’t need to explain. After everything that had happened in the past month- in that cell, they knew each other almost better than they knew themselves.

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Shiro walked onto the bridge, and narrowly avoided interrupting a call in progress by sliding against the wall. Coran's attention was on the screen in front of him and Allura, and Kolivan's features filled the majority of the frame. Allura didn't look impressed, and Kolivan looked- well, he couldn't be certain, but Shiro would hazard a guess at labelling it as 'annoyed'

"-u and your Blades were next to useless when we were searching for our missing Paladins-" Allura was saying as Kolivan interrupted her.

"I will not hear such blasphemy. Two of my men nearly lost their lives following a lead to find *your* Paladins, Princess, and they will never be the same again. If we hadn't retreated when we did, our organization might have been completely exposed to the toxin, and as vital as your Paladins are, to the both of us, their lives weren't worth risking the entirety of our resistance to the Empire Zarkon built.

Allura scoffed. "So the Galra run scared from the Fenieu sickness now? My, how things have changed in ten thousand years."

"Don't insult me Princess, I know you are well aware that this is nothing as simple as Fenieu. In fact, your actions and words seem to indicate that your castle and its inhabitants are facing an infection yourself."

"We are facing nothing of the sort. What we are doing is caring for the paladins that we recently recovered, without your help."

"If we hadn't sent you those frequencies--"

"Those frequencies were hardly useful; *you knew where*--"

"And good soldiers lost their minds after the concentrated dose they were exposed to. They had no way of telling us where they'd been. Might I remind you that it was *you* that picked up on the automatic distress signal from their ship as they attempted to fly into a sun?"

Allura fell silent.

"Now I believe you had an actual question for me. And please, considering that I am already aware of the truth, disperse with your diplomatic theatrics."

Allura narrowed her eyes, then sighed; Shiro thought for a short moment that she looked like the girl she was. While her tone remained strong, Shiro could tell from her stance that she was nervous of the answer she might get. He'd been on too many diplomatic missions with her to miss the signs.

"It has been ten thousand years," she stated, "Does the Blade of Marmora know of any remedies? For the after-sickness?"

Kolivan bowed his head sadly. "No. What you seek was never something that Zarkon sought. Victory, or Death," he said simply, as though that statement was answer enough; then he continued after a long moment, his voice slightly softer. "There has been very little of the plant to research. As you likely know, Zarkon destroyed it wherever it was found. The Blade has never had either the reason or the capability to research its properties.

"I- understand." Allura took a deep breath.

"If I may ask a question in return?" Kolivan's tone was oddly respectful, given the reprimand he'd just dealt.



As Shiro stood unnoticed, he frowned. What was going on? Why hadn't he heard anything about this?

Allura nodded her assent to Kolivan.

"There are rumours of something," he hedged, "but no one knows the truth. It was long ago- but you might have heard talk, or perhaps even witness it yourself." He took a breath, and Shiro took his hesitation to show just how much weight Kolivan placed on his question. "Is this how it happened;" Kolivan asked, "the first time?"

The Princess inhaled sharply, then nodded slowly. "Yes" There was a pain in her words, and Shiro could imagine how acutely it would translate through her gaze as well, "it is."

Coran happened to catch sight of Shiro just then, and interrupted whatever it was that Kolivan was about to say.

"Shiro! How are the young lads doing?"

Allura whipped around, seemingly- relieved, Shiro thought, that whatever line of questioning Kolivan sought had been put on hold, if only for a little while.

There was so much of this conversation that he would have to talk with Allura about later on, when they didn't have an audience. Shiro made a mental note, then replied to Coran: "It was a difficult night, but at least they are home, and can heal. Princess-" Shiro redirected his attention, "what's our situation?"

"The Olkari have directed us to the location of a Nebula that effectively blocks any incoming or outgoing transmissions. Most ships have trouble navigating through the particular combination of gasses that form the cloud, and so they avoid it- but as you know, the castle is no ordinary ship. We'll hide in there for as long as need be while the Paladins heal, and the Blade will cover any distress beacons that are sent out." She looked pointedly at Kolivan's face on the screen.

Kolivan nodded mockingly. "It would be our pleasure to continue to do what we've done for thousands of years in Voltron's absence."

Allura grimaced. "We'll send a shuttle into communications range at pre-determined times to keep current with happenings. Coran, have you sent the Blade of Marmora the schedule?"

Eyes widening, Coran hurriedly slapped a few buttons and winked at the Princess. "Away like a smart man from the nose of a Ibicuraks!"

Allura nodded. "Very well then. Kolivan, we will contact you later."

Kolivan grumbled, and his expression reminded Shiro of Iverson's own when *he* didn't get to call the shots. Shiro suppressed a chuckle as Kolivan nodded, and shut off the connection.

Allura groaned.

"Now, now, Princess-"

"The Blade of Marmora has been an incredible ally in our fight against tyranny, I only wish they weren't so... ambiguous and... difficult, to deal with."

Shiro chuckled. "Have you ever thought, Princess, that you might be just as difficult and ambiguous to them, as they are to you? From what I heard of the conversation, neither of you were

forthcoming with either full, or clear answers.”

“Ah.” Allura looked away, guilt colouring her features.

“But that is something we can talk about later.” Shiro continued, “I was thinking over things this morning, and I wanted to be clear.” He looked pointedly at Allura, almost daring her to challenge him, and yet somehow he knew that she wouldn’t. Still, there couldn’t be any confusion on this point, so he continued. “I will not force either of them into forming Voltron.” He paused, nervously judging her expression.

Allura simply looked expectant, and waited for him to continue.

He took a breath, and spoke. “It’s not- easy, the idea of letting others into your head after something like that. Trust me, I- I know. If I know them as well as I think I do, they’re going to want to, well, protect us from the demons that haunt them.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because its what I did- what I still try to do; and for better or for worse, I’ve set a bad example for them.” He sighed. “I don’t want to push them. We need to wait until they are ready. I ask that you please allow them that.”

“Of course,” Allura said gently.

Shiro huffed a breath of relief. “Thank you, Princess. And Coran-“

“As we discussed, they are both welcome to come and talk to me at any time.”

“Thanks.” He shot the advisor a grateful smile. “Alright then, I’ll get back to them; Hunk and Pidge are planning a breakfast surprise in the lounge.”

“Ahh, well as much as Hunk’s cooking sounds delightful, we’ve already eaten and have plenty to keep us busy here.” He chuckled, “They always think they’re so sneaky. We’ll leave you young’uns to it then?” Coran smiled softly.

“Thanks, Coran, Princess,” he said with a nod, and left the room.

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Shiro was still a few hallways away when Lance’s cry of excitement rang out clear as a bell.

“WAFFLES!”

Shiro chuckled. His worries about Allura and all the half formed concerns in his head, vanished immediately at the light and familiar, simple pleasure emitting from the Blue Paladin. Shiro entered the lounge just as Lance made another exclamation, “IT’S RED SAP!”

Hunk looked offended, Keith was somewhat confused, but Pidge’s features lit up. “OMG LANCE YOU ARE A GENIUS!”

She grinned and held up her hand for a high five, which he eagerly matched and their palms hit with a loud SLAP, and a slight wince. “I knew it reminded me of something,” Pidge gushed, “*especially* when put in combination with the waffles, but I just couldn’t put my finger on it!”

Lance chuckled, then shrugged smugly, glowing at the compliment. “It’s not your fault; I mean, not everyone remembers things like I do.”

Pidge scowled. “I don’t know if you realize just *how* many things Matt likes to talk about and reference, I don’t know when he has the time for it-“

Shiro chuckled again, and the four Paladins looked over at him, their faces varying from confusion to exasperation. Shiro shrugged. “It’s just, I know exactly what she means. Matt is full of obscure references.”

Keith rolled his eyes, and Pidge sat back down into her seat. She held a plate of waffles with red drizzle all across the top settled neatly on her lap and smirked as though Shiro’s comment was all she needed to win their discussion. “See?” she prompted, “Shiro gets it.”

Lance narrowed his eyes, leaning forward with intensity. “Okay, maybe, he allowed, “but does Shiro, *get it*?”

“Oh??” Pidge leaned forward with equal curiosity, and Shiro racked his brain to connect the dots but found himself drawing a blank.

“Nope,” Shiro replied, shaking his head, “But I will grab some waffles and red syrup-“

“Sap!” Katie and Lance corrected him in chorus,

“Because, Hunk,” Shiro continued, ignoring their looks of scandal, “it looks delicious.”

Lance and Katie groaned, apparently both giving up on him.

“Thanks, Shiro.” Hunk replied appreciatively, then added slowly: “but guys, it’s not sap. I was actually able to boil down some berries from that water planet we passed a few weeks ago, and I’ve been saving it for when-“

“But it’s clearly red?” Lance stated.

“Well yes-“

“And you can eat it with Waffles?” Pidge added.

“Well yes-“

“Then I’m gonna call it Red Sap, big guy. You can’t stop me.” Lance took a large bite and grinned, teeth red with the sticky substance.

Hunk looked bewildered, and opened his mouth again to argue against Lance’s logic, when Keith put his hand on Hunk’s leg and shook his head.

“Just let him have it,” Keith advised, “you know it’s not worth the argument.”

Hunk sighed and nodding, pulled a some space waffles onto a plate of his own. “Yeah, I know.” He froze, and immediately looked over at Keith as though his answer would change the fate of everything. “But Keith- Just to make me happy, please tell me you know that it isn’t sap, right? That they are really two different things? I mean, regardless of the shared sugar base... You get that, right? They’re different?”

Keith stared at him over a bite of waffle and red topping, and smirked.

“So Hunk...” Shiro quickly drew their resident chef into a different conversation, one about energy converters, and rolled his eyes as Lance shot Keith a smirk of his own.

When they were done with their delicious meal, Shiro took a moment to lay down the ground rules.

“Keith and Lance, I’m sorry, but you’re restricted to the castle for at least a week, and no missions until I think you’re ready.”

No one saw any need to argue with that.

“If an emergency comes up that desperately needs a lion, Pidge or Hunk or I will handle it. You guys have standing orders to do- well, whatever you want, or rather, whatever you need. We’ll work out some sort of loose schedule to help you both heal, but it’s never going to be mandatory- I don’t want you to ever feel trapped. If you need something from any of us just ask, or if you need alone time, that’s fine too. The only thing I will insist on, is that you promise you will talk to Coran or I about what happened. Even if it’s just a little bit. You can come see one of us on your own, or together, but it is essential that you talk about what happened in one way or another.”

Keith inhaled deeply, and Lance shuddered, but they each snuck a glance at the other, then nodded at Shiro.

“Good.” He smiled softly. “I’m also going to warn you that we will be training with the headsets before we try to form Voltron at all, so you two let us know when you’re ready to try, okay?”

Again they nodded, both visibly nervous, but also unsurprised. Of course they had been expecting it, Shiro thought with pride, they were smart kids

“Alright, that’s it I think. Anyone have questions?” He looked around the room, and each of the younger Paladins shook their heads. “No? Alright. Well, I’m going to leave you guys to it, I have some things to take care of with Black, and files on more planets to go over. I’ll be on the comms if you need me.”

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Shiro left for the training deck, or Black, or the bridge, or somewhere- Hunk would go check on him later- but for now he had one last surprise to reveal. Reaching behind the sofa, he pulled forward a few small pots, and Lance’s face lit up. He knew Hunk so well.

“Are those-?”

Hunk chuckled nervously, and waved ‘bye’ to Pidge as she tried to sneak out of the room. “Yeah, They were something I distracted myself with when we were looking for you, you know? Something that reminded me of my best friend. They were- well, I’ve got several recipes for face masks completely made from alien ingredients now, but they were a coping mechanism of sorts. For me. You know...”

Lance smiled, “Well I’m back now,” he said softly, “what do you say we try one out?”

Hunk nodded eagerly, “I was hoping you would say that.” He grinned, and couldn’t help but let himself fall into a familiar rhythm as Lance sat cross legged in front of him. As he closed his eyes to let Lance apply the mask on his own skin, he couldn’t help but notice- and then spent the next

few moments wondering at the smile on Keith's face. After a little pondering, Hunk concluded that Keith's smile was clearly in response to the joy now radiating from Lance's, and his heart warmed at the thought that they'd grown so close. Following that train of thought, he silently remarked how the Red paladin hadn't made any move to leave even when it was clear they were going to be doing something that he wouldn't usually partake of.

Before, Keith would have left to train with Shiro, or chill with Red, or research his own things in private. Now, it seemed he was happy to settle down on the couch with a tablet to keep them company. It didn't seem as though Keith thought there was no other option, that he *had* to stay; but rather that no other option had even occurred to him as worth pursuing. It was... interesting.

"Hunk? HUUUNKKK?"

Hunk shook off his thoughts and refocused on Lance. "Sorry buddy- I missed that. What were you talking about?" Hunk could feel Lance's playful eye roll, and smiled.

"I was asking what your latest project is? I mean, other than the sound system, obviously?"

"Obviously," Hunk chuckled. "Well, I've been working on something along the same lines, but also a little- different."

"I don't think you could be more obscure if you tried," Lance teased, "and I've seen you try. Just give it to me straight."

Hunk shrugged, and got a small swat on his shoulder for the movement. "Instruments," he said plainly

"Wait- what?"

"Well, I came across a storage bay with some strange alien instruments- please don't ask Coran about them."

"Oh?"

"Let's just say I've heard enough about alien musical instruments to last me a lifetime. But now that you guys are back, I thought maybe I'd try my hand at rebuilding some classical earth instruments."

"Hunk, that is so, cool!"

"Yeah? You think so? Oh I'm so glad to hear that."

"Definitely cool. We can make a space band!"

"A- wha? Lance- do you even play an instrument?"

"Are you kidding? I'm a guitar whiz. Didn't I ever show you?"

Hunk frowned, and then nodded slowly, "Yeah- maybe I remember something; wasn't that the same night that--"

"AH, AH, AH, we don't talk about that. Remember? Also- stop moving. It's hard to put a face mask on you when you won't stay still."

Hunk chuckled.

“Alright, well, good enough; I was pretty much done anyways. My turn!”

Hunk smiled and opened his eyes, happy to listen to Lance chatter away about anything at all as he reached for a pot of face mask goo to lather onto Lance’s features. This was something Hunk knew that Lance enjoyed, he always had, simply because it reminded him of time hanging out with his sisters back on earth, of a childhood filled with love and adoration from his big family.

Hunk scooped some of the purple mixture onto his fingers, and raised his hand up to begin applying the mask. As soon as he started to reach in in order to touch Lance’s face, the Blue Paladin twitched, and Hunk instinctively checked to make sure he had his sleeves tucked back and that he hadn’t accidentally brushed Lance’s skin and tickled him. Satisfied that he wouldn’t be getting purple gunk on his clothing, Hunk brought his hand forward again to smooth the mixture out. As soon as Hunk was within an inch of contact, Lance inhaled sharply and suppressed a shiver down his spine, absentmindedly interrupting his persistent dialogue to comment on the sudden chill in the warm room.

Hunk paused, worrying on his lip as he sat back. He watched apprehensively as Lance kept chatting away, eyes closed, apparently completely unaware of his actions. Keith looked over to them and exchanged a confused look with Hunk’s very insightful one, and Hunk brought his arm up for one last try before he would say anything. Lance curled in on himself- only a little, but more than enough for Hunk to notice- as soon as even the slightest of shadows crossed Lance’s face.

“Lance,” he said softly, “did you want to open your eyes? You know you don’t have to have them closed, right? Would you be more comfortable that way?”

Realization dawned in Keith’s gaze, but Lance’s brow only furrowed in confusion.

“What? No- I don’t need to open my eyes. Just hurry up will you? At this rate yours will be ready to take off before mine is even on!”

Hunk’s heart squeezed a little when he realized that Lance was pulling away because he was subconsciously scared, of him, of Hunk, his fellow paladin, his best friend, and he *didn’t even realize it*.

Hunk took a deep breath, then nodded. “Alright alright, just hold on...” he placated, and crossed all his metaphorical fingers and toes that things would be alright this time. “Lance, I’m going to start now, okay?” he offered shyly.

Lance nodded, “Yeah yeah, go go- whenever. But seriously dude- what do *you* think?”

Hunk wasn’t completely paying attention to Lance’s story at this point, and as such he wasn’t sure how to reply as he brought his hand up with the purple goo. Lance shivered as Hunk reached forwards, and as much as he knew he could simply reach a little further and smear on the face mask, and Lance would probably never know the difference, it felt just *wrong*. The Yellow Paladin took in a shaky breath, then opted for his ever present backup plan in case he needed to get out quick- for either his or someone else’s sake. A ‘Kitchen Emergency’ to get him away from there, before Lance could see him cry.

“Oh no!” He feigned sloppily, “I totally forgot something... in the oven! Here!” Hunk leapt up and shoved the pot of face mask into Keith’s hands, “You’re going to have to finish for me- I’ve got to go— uh, save... my cookies!”

“Oh! Cookies!” Lance opened his eyes, and smiled up at Hunk, “Hunk don’t worry about me, the cookies need saving!” Lance cried out, oblivious to Hunk’s heartbreak.

“I’m sorry Lance- really-I’ll, I’ll be right back- I’ve just- cookies!” Hunk babbled as he backed out the doorway. Keith sat on the couch still with a small pot in his hands, a pained look on his face, and Lance looked over at him with a trusting smile.

“Go, go!” Lance chuckled

As he walked down the hall Hunk could hear Lance trying to talk Keith through proper face mask application; and Hunk was ashamed to admit that it hurt like hell when he thought that Lance probably wouldn’t flinch away from Keith’s touch.

He broke into a run as soon as he could justify it- as soon as they wouldn’t be able to hear it- and his feet took him straight to the Kitchen. Thankfully, that meant to Pidge as well.

“Hunk?” Pidge asked as Hunk stumbled around the corner, then collapsed against the wall. “Hunk- what’s wrong? Is everything okay?”

He nodded.

“Well- no. I mean, things are clearly not ‘all okay’- Hunk, what happened?”

Hunk looked up at Pidge sadly, tears in his eyes. “Lance- he; he kept pulling away from me. And I couldn’t handle it. What kind of a friend am I that I couldn’t handle it?”

“Hunk-“ Pidge consoled, and absentmindedly handed him a damp cloth.

He quickly wiped off whatever remained of the face mask, nodding in thanks.

“Hunk-“

He couldn’t stop the flow of tears, and eventually gave up. Hunk hung his head, ashamed to meet Pidge’s gaze. “My best friend just went, he went through something awful- more than one awful thing, and- and he comes back, and he’s alive, and he’s here, and I know that some stuff will be hard, I know that, I knew that, but I didn’t expect this Pidge and I, I ran.”

“Hunk, don’t do this to yourself.”

“Pidge, he didn’t even know what he was doing! He didn’t even realize that every time I reached towards him, or moved closer to him, he kept pulling away. I-it’s not his fault, and I know that, and I hate those Pirates for what they did to him, him and Keith both- but it, it hurt, Pidge.”

He looked up at her, hands in his lap, and the flood of tears spilled over the edge. “It hurt. I’m an awful friend. It was the, the smallest little thing, and I ran.” He looked up at Pidge, desperately begging her with his eyes to forgive him. “He needs me Pidge, and I *ran*.” Hunk sobbed and ducked his head, nearly missing the Green Paladin’s small arms as she did her best to wrap him in a hug.

“So go back,” she said simply. “Make it right. He won’t blame you. Lance and Keith, they’re still finding their way back to themselves. You and me, we’ll be strong for them in the meantime.”

“It sounds simple,” he choked, “when you say it like that.”

“Yeah, well, I find people have a way of making things complicated when they don’t have to be.

You're his friend, you care about him?"

"Yeah, of course. I care about all of you," Hunk said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Pidge froze, her cheeks tinged slightly pink. Hunk supposed that it was one thing for him to know he cared, it was another for her to hear it out loud. "Yeah, well... right back atcha."

Hunk smiled shyly.

The two of them sat there for a while longer, Pidge comforting how she could, and Hunk accepting all that she gave.

"Pidge," Hunk started slowly, "What kind of friend runs?"

"The sort of friend that hurts to see their friend in pain, and doesn't want to hurt them more by letting them witness the hurt their hurt caused."

"Oh."

"You're not a bad friend, Hunk."

"Is it bad, that I wish it had been me? Not- not so that Keith could have been safe, but so that I could have been there for Lance? He- He trusts him, and that used to be me, and I miss it already, Pidge. Our friendship- It's gonna be different now isn't it?"

"I don't think there's a way around that," she agreed solemnly. "I don't have much experience with this, but I do know that loss changes the relationships of everyone it touches."

"But we got them back."

"And I'm gonna get my brother and dad back. Doesn't mean that the relationship between my Mother and I will ever be the same." Pidge bit her lip, then stood, reaching down to give Hunk a hand up.

"Common big guy. Enough sappiness before I start crying too. Lets get back to our boys?"

Hunk nodded, then froze. "Wait! Cookies!"

Pidge frowned. "What?"

"I told Lance I had to save the cookies from the oven."

Pidge turned to look at the Altean cooker that served as their oven. "Hunk, we don't have time-"

She froze, eyes sparkling with an idea. "Unless..."

"What- Do you have a time machine prototype or something lying around?"

"What?" Pidge halted her movements, bewildered. "Of course not, Hunk. Do you know the possible ramifications of time travel? Paradoxes and shattered time lines and Entropic Cascade Failure and-"

"Pidge- you know that that only happens when travelling to alternate realities, not time travelling."

"No," Pidge clarified, "Entropic Cascade is a theory of what happens when there are two of the



same being in relative proximity in the same universe- who's to say time travel couldn't be a cause of that?"

Hunk hummed. "I suppose I'll give it to you. So no time machine then?"

"Nope. But I do have this!" Pidge put a plate of something- Hunk didn't see what- in the Altean cooker, and set it to the maximum temperature.

"Uhh, Pidge?" he asked worriedly.

"Wait for it..."

It wasn't long before smoke started to billow from the sides of the 'cooker', and Pidge reached to quickly turn the temperature off.

"See? Just tell Lance I burnt them- it wouldn't be the first time" She smirked.

"I suppose... I have to admit-" he sniffed the air, "It does smell like burnt cookies."

"Vanilla," Pidge supplied.

"What?"

"I added some of that stuff you said was similar to Vanilla."

"Pidge, you're a genius."

She shrugged. "I know."

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Summary

“I have something that I must- apologize for. I have misled you all, and it has been made clear to me that this may not have been the correct course of action to take”

### Chapter Notes

Thanks to my wonderful beta Dragon\_Stone, and to Lauren, Maddie and Psychosei for the constant snark that keeps me sane.

Thanks to you guys for coming back every time i post a new chapter, thanks to everyone in my life that puts up with my obsessive love for animated shows, and thanks to everyone in yours who does the same.

Alright i'm tired, i'm sappy, imma shut it and post the chapter already. Enjoy.

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Katie was sullen and distracted as she sat down next to Lance at lunch, (leftovers from dinner the night before) and as distracted as the Blue Paladin was, Shiro knew there were some things that he would always notice.

“Pidge?” Lance prompted tentatively, “You alright?”

Katie froze as though she'd been caught sneaking an extra slice of pie in the middle of the night, eyes wide for a moment, and shook her head. “It's nothing, Lance.”

Lance narrowed his eyes. “Nope. If Keith and I are going to let you guys into our heads, then that's not gonna cut it. What's wrong?”

Katie's eyes flashed with pain, and Shiro knew that Lance had caught her in a logical paradox. “I will tell you, Lance, I promise. Just-“ she pleaded, “later- alright? Once Allura gets here?”

Lance pursed his lips, but nodded.

“Shiro-“ Keith addressed him, not so subtly giving both Katie and Lance another conversation to focus on. “Where did you disappear to after breakfast?”

“I was on the Bridge with Coran. I thought I'd give you guys some space.”

“Oh.” Keith sounded slightly disappointed, but nodded. “Well, we were talking about the headsets...”

Shiro offhandedly noted the use of ‘we’, and wondered if Lance and Keith had realized that their perception of themselves had shifted. This wasn't the first time since they'd both been declared

healthy that one or the other had spoken for the both of them, or that they'd picked off a sentence where the other left it without a hitch. They seemed to either agree on something, or disagree, as a *unit*. The only time, it seemed, that Lance or Keith approached anything as an individual- was when they were worried about the other.

"And we were wondering," Lance continued, "how about tomorrow morning?"

Shiro was slightly surprised that they would be willing to let the others into their heads so soon. Still, he understood their desire for things to go back to some semblance of normal. "If that's what you want; sure." He agreed cautiously, then added his own condition: "But please make sure that you're both ready for this. Don't rush yourselves, it won't help in the long run."

"The thing is, Shiro, we're not sure how much better it's gonna get anytime soon. The universe needs Voltron, so we're just gonna have to suck it up," Lance offered nonchalantly.

Shiro stared at Lance across the table, impressed and horrified in equal measures. The boy was right of course- the Universe did need Voltron. Shiro only wished that they didn't need Voltron at the cost of the Paladin's well-being.

"Lance-" he started softly, "It may not be what I should say as the head of Voltron-" he paused, considering, "but then again, maybe it's exactly what the head *should* say. Voltron's not worth your health."

Lance looked at him like he was adorable, but clearly not thinking things through. "No, that's exactly what it is, Shiro. What are our lives worth versus the fate of the galaxy, or the universe?"

Shiro was stunned into silence at Lance's cold pragmatism, and didn't have much of a chance to reply before Allura walked in, drawing Lance's attention.

"Allura- you're here! Pidge-" Lance spun around, a goofy grin on his face that was on the complete other end of the spectrum from the mood that was emanating from both girls. "Pidge, are you going to tell us what's going on now?"

"...Allura?" Shiro asked, his voice steady despite how much Lance's cold pragmatism had absolutely shaken him, "what's going on?" He didn't know how much more pain and bad news he could deal with just now, and his anxiety grew worse and worse as he took in her body language.

Allura swallowed, and then sat slowly at her seat at the head of the table; the one she only used when they were doing etiquette training for ambassadorial purposes, or when she wanted to make a point. The room grew cold with the silence that permeated as she settled herself in the stiff chair.

"Paladins," she said after a long moment, taking the time to look at each of them in turn "I have something that I must- apologize for. I have misled you all, and it has been made clear to me that-" she glanced at Katie briefly, "that this may not have been the correct course of action to take. I am truly sorry, and I hope that you can forgive me."

Keith, was the first to find his voice and speak. "I think that our forgiveness," he started slowly, "will depend on what happened." Shiro found himself nodding in agreement as Keith continued. "What's going on?"

"I-" Allura tried to start, then bit her lip and looked over at Katie. "Pidge, do you have your tablet?"

Katie frowned, but nodded. She pulled her tablet out and unlocked it, before fiddling with something on the screen. Did she know what Allura was looking for? She must; it would explain

her behaviour, both today and yesterday. Shiro took a deep breath; Katie's clear fear and anger over the subject matter worried him more than anything else so far.

Allura started to speak as Katie finished up with her device. "I made a decision to- withhold something from you."

Reaching forward, Katie offered the tablet to Allura, but the Princess shook her head.

"No, give it to Shiro. It will explain better -be much clearer- than I can."

All eyes turned on him, and he nervously took the tablet that Katie gave him. What could be so bad that Allura wouldn't just say it? She wasn't one to mince words, and usually at least tried to keep her emotions out of things that might cause disturbances within their group. Yet here she was, clearly nervous, and worried, plain for everyone to see, and yet she refused to explain herself?

"Allura-" he tried to ask, to get her to just *talk* about this,

"Please, just read it, Shiro."

He nodded, and started to read. Displayed on the tablet was a thorough detailing of the toxin that both Lance and Keith had been exposed to; the one that had almost killed Lance, and had seemingly brought back Keith's susceptibility to be pulled into panic inducing flashbacks. (Although how much the toxin rather than the Pirates were to blame he'd yet to determine; but it didn't really matter in the long run.) He nodded as he read. Most of this was information that he already knew. Then he started looking through the other cases of recovery that Katie had obviously compiled, and was confronted with new information.

In Altean physiology, it seemed that the toxin, regardless of how long the exposure, often altered the patient's brain chemistry and composition. Altered it in such a way, that it changed the way they thought about things, which Shiro couldn't believe was ever a good thing. He took a shaky breath filled with concern, and pulled open the medical data on the next tab that Katie had set up.

It was Lance's. He'd half expected that at this point.

He opened the next tab, saw the same data, and quickly moved his finger to tap the next option- Wait.

No, the data wasn't the same. His eyebrows scrunched together, and he checked the space dates on the two files. He looked back at the data, and then checked the dates again. He glanced up first at the Princess who had kept this from them, from *him*, and then at The Green Paladin, who'd obviously called her out on it. The pain and pride in his chest together were too much, and he exhaled a long breath in an attempt to regain his composure.

"Pidge? Is this- is this true?" His eyes flicked unconsciously towards Lance, and then back to Katie.

As she nodded, there was a chorus of curiosity and worry from the other three.

"Shiro, what is it?"

"Ohh this is not good. I've got a feeling this is really not good..."

"You're leaving us out of the loop! C'mmon, sharing is caring!"

"Go to the next tab," Katie instructed.

He did as she asked, and found a small typed file of her own making, clearly written for the

princess.

**| It didn't affect Lance's connection with Blue,  
| But it COULD have!  
| I will be collecting more data on Keith,  
| And updating what I have on Lance—  
| You are going to help me,  
|  
| I'm not taking no for an answer.**

Shiro exhaled quickly, and brought a hand up to massage his temple, before handing the device directly to Lance.

The Blue Paladin took it eagerly, and deliberately tipped it so that Keith could read it with him. Katie had already pulled out another tablet and given it to Hunk.

Shiro levelled a cold gaze at their Altean Princess. "Why?"

He swallowed in surprise at the fear in her eyes. "Because I thought you all had more than enough to deal with without this."

"You should have come to me. This is *my team's* health, and last time I checked you aren't an expert on humans, either of you." He turned to look at Coran as well. "You should have come to me."

"Surely, Shiro, you can see that I had all of your best interests at heart--"

"I understand your reasoning, I just can't condone it. I thought we were past this point? Princess-Coran- both of you-" he took a wobbly breath. "I thought you trusted me?"

Allura hung her head, guilt and pain flashed across her face.

Hunk finished reading only a few seconds before Keith and Lance.

"I was right, this isn't good at all."

"But- he's okay isn't he?" Keith grasped for Lance's hand. "We're both fine, right?"

Lance for his part was silent. After a moment he looked up at Keith, then Shiro, who were both waiting for his response before proceeding. In his eyes was the pain of his realization of what could have come to pass.

"I almost lost Blue?" he asked softly, his voice nowhere near its normal levels of adrenaline and volume.

"But you didn't," Shiro reminded him, then glanced to Katie for help; he knew she could explain the data they'd read better than anyone—besides maybe the Alteans— but he didn't think any of his Paladins wanted to have it explained to them by Allura or Coran right now.

"To be honest," Katie's voice was strong, and Shiro couldn't help but feel proud of her. "Yes."

Lance inhaled sharply.

“But Shiro’s right, you didn’t lose her, so that’s good. Allura said you two were communicating yesterday, right? That means your bond with Blue is going to be fine. If it wasn’t you would know, and well, we would probably know too? You wouldn’t be acting like you, but you are, you know, acting like you, so everything is normal on that front.”

“Okay.” Lance looked relieved. “But Keith—”

“Hasn’t had a problem with Red so far, and he’s still acting all like his emo-mullet self;” she paused, “well mostly- so his Quintessence clearly hasn’t been affected either. I want data though,” she warned, “just to be sure.”

Lance nodded hurriedly, “Of course. After this?”

A wave of relief swept across Katie’s face. “Yeah that sounds good. Hunk-?” She spun to look at him on her other side. “Can I get your help?”

“Wha- Oh yeah , yeah, absolutely. Definitely. We’ve got to know for sure Keith is still Keith.”

The Red Paladin sighed. “She just said I am me. Pidge’s just worried about... other side effects-right?”

Keith gave Katie a significant look, and she nodded slowly. “Yeah. Just because the toxin didn’t effect your brain in a way that messed up your relationship with your Lions, doesn’t mean nothing else happened.” She reached forward to pick up a bowl of some sauce like substance, and used her Bayard to burn a small hole in the bottom. Blue sludge began to pour out, and Hunk rushed to grab another bowl to catch it. “Just because the gravy isn’t spilling from the biggest opening—in this case the top—doesn’t mean it isn’t still spilling.” She shrugged, and put the leaking bowl down on the table, much to Hunk’s horror as he rushed to use some pink bread-like substance to temporarily plug the hole. “I want to make sure that if anything is theoretically ‘spilling’, we know about it.

“Does that mean my brain is going to start leaking?” Lance’s voice rose in pitch with his worry, and he put his free hand worriedly to his head, as though he could stop anything from getting out by holding it in. “Am I going to lose my- my Quintessence or something?!”

Keith rolled his eyes. “It’s a metaphor, Lance-” he frowned, and looked at Katie to be sure. “It *is* a metaphor, right? We’re not gonna lose anything, are we Pidge?”

She shook her head slowly. “No, not on the level you’re thinking about.”

“So what sort of- other things are you worried about?” Lance queried

She shrugged. “Anything, really. If the toxin did change the way you put thoughts together; even only slightly, anything could happen. Magical math skills, weird taste buds, new talents, new fears, new pain responses, new sensitivities.”

“So not necessarily bad things?”

“But not necessarily good things either,” Shiro concluded. Katie nodded.

There was so much that could go wrong, he knew that, and he also knew that he was only just beginning to wrap his head around it. This was a precarious situation at best, and they’d have to keep a close eye on Keith and Lance. There was no way he would let them try and deal with this on their own.

The meal had been drawing to a close anyways, and no one seemed to be hungry anymore, so Shiro called it.

“Alright; you four head to wherever it is Pidge wants to run these tests, let’s see what we can find.”

There was a slight shuffling as they nodded and stood, a soft ‘yes sir’ from Keith that Shiro wasn’t sure if he’d imagined or not, all of them too worried to even complain about forgotten dessert.

He caught Allura’s eye, and she nodded, her gaze anxious. There was more to discuss here, and she knew it.

As his fellow Paladins stood up to leave, Lance turned to Shiro. “You’re not coming?”

Shiro wondered if it would make them feel better if he were.

“Later. You get started without me.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Lance nodded and turned after Keith, who was waiting for him in the doorway.

As the doors shut behind them, Shiro took a shaky breath.

“Why?” he asked, “What could I have possibly done to give you the impression that I couldn’t be trusted with this?”

“This wasn’t about trust at all-”

“Of course it was.”

“Shiro, I do trust you-“

He sighed. “Then why did you keep this from me? From everyone? I thought we’d agreed to make decisions like this together, if nothing else to keep a united front for the team? If not that, then for the good of Voltron, and the universe!”

“I told you-“

“That you didn’t want us to have to worry about it? I’d have rather worried about- and known about this right away, then have to worry about you potentially not telling me things in the future, things that I *need to know*.”

“Shiro.” Allura’s voice was sharper. “You have been having a difficult time lately, we all have. You spoke to me about letting Keith heal in his own way; can you not understand that I was simply applying the same principal to yourself? You need rest too, Shiro.”

Her words almost rendered him speechless. She would take a situation where he was caring for one of his Paladins, and turn it into an excuse for not telling him about a risk to their health? “This is not the same,” he said, his voice emotionless, “at all. And if you can’t recognize that, you’re not the Princess I thought you were.”

Shiro could tell that something about Allura was just *off*. He knew that she *still* wasn't telling him everything. Shiro was, in a word, disappointed. He’d thought they’d moved beyond issues like this. After a few moments, there was nothing but to asked the question that scared him the most. He

wasn't sure he really wanted to know the answer, but there was no denying that he needed to hear before he could move forward. He took another deep breath.

"How long have you known?"

Allura bit her lip.

"Allura..." Shiro warned.

"For sure? As soon as we discovered the essence of the toxin."

Shiro felt as though the oxygen had been sucked out of his chest. "That was over four *days* ago!" he inhaled quickly, "and you suspected it even earlier than that?"

"Shiro--"

"No, stop," he ordered, clear and cold, and he didn't release her gaze as he shifted his focus.

"Coran, does Pidge know how to operate the technology that she needs?"

"Uh- yes, yes she does."

"Good. Then I'm going to go and join them." He stood, needing to get out of there before he either did, or said something he would truly regret later. As he walked to the door, he almost missed the soft, pained words.

"I am sorry, Shiro."

He almost stopped, turned around, and said they'd find a way to fix this.

Then he remembered Lance's face when he'd found out how close he'd been to losing his link to Blue, and Shiro's resolve hardened. He had to do everything in his power to stop this from happening again; and that meant giving the Alteans time to really think the situation over.

"They may be your Lions, Princess, but they're my people. Don't you dare do something like this again."

Without even turning to see their reaction to his warning, Shiro left the room.



## Chapter 5

### Chapter Summary

Was it always going to be this way?

Was this the life of a Paladin?

### Chapter Notes

Surprise! I'm not sure why i even tried to set a schedule- i'm awful with schedules. So- here's another chapter. Have some nice Keith and Shiro bonding, and a hint at backstory. A sprinkle, you might call it.

Thanks to Dragon\_Stone for the edits; you are as always, amazing- and quick on the turnaround, Whereas i... am not... always... :-O (Next time will be faster i promissse! XD)

Thanks to all the usual nerds :D

Enjoy- and leave me a comment if you want; comments are very very loved and can inspire writers to write more :D

Without furthur delay... Chapter 5!

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Keith and Lance followed Pidge to one of the rooms that was just off to the side of the regeneration pods. They were the rooms with all the equipment that no one ever wanted to see unless it *was* an emergency, because it meant something was really wrong. Keith acted his part of guinea pig, and Lance followed him from device to device, letting Pidge use all the scary equipment she wanted on him. Mostly it was boring, and there was a lot of waiting while Pidge and Hunk recalibrated certain functions on the equipment to accommodate for Keith's genealogy to get the readings that they needed.

It was a long afternoon. Lance was napping on Keith's shoulder- and had been for almost half an hour- when Shiro finally showed up, carrying the bean bag that Keith had been using while Lance healed. Keith smiled as Shiro shot him a significant look, and he gently nudged Lance awake.

"Hey."

Lance grumbled but opened his eyes, “What?” he murmured.

“Shiro’s brought you something you can sleep on,” Keith explained

“Oh. Cool.”

Lance slid clumsily off the counter they’d perched on top of, and curled up on the beanbag that Shiro set on the floor. He refused to relinquish Keith’s hand, (not that Keith minded at all) and so he ended up on the floor too, leaning against both the bean bag and Lance as Lance swiftly fell back to sleep.

Keith looked up at Shiro’s small but annoying smirk.

“What?” he asked, daring him to say something.

Shiro shook his head gently. “It’s just nice to have you back.”

Keith stared for another moment, and then sighed. “It’s really good to be back.”

They stayed like that for a while, just watching as their geniuses debated over the benefits of one thing or another, each lost in their own thoughts. The past- few days, week, month— Just when Keith’d thought that maybe things might... fix themselves. Something else happened.

Was it always going to be this way?

Was this the life of a Paladin?

Eventually Keith sighed, and Shiro looked at him curiously, the very image of composure. Keith didn’t hesitate long before he answered the unasked question in Shiro’s eyes, voicing his thoughts. “I just wish things could go back to normal. We- I don’t know what to do with- all of this.” He gestured around the room, at the odd technology, and the strange situation they found themselves in.

There was a moment as Shiro mulled Keith’s words over.

“Normal,” Shiro repeated cautiously, “might be hard for a while.”

Keith grimaced. “Somehow, I knew you’d say that.”

Shiro deliberated for another moment, then purposefully sat right next to Keith on the floor.

“So, where’d you disappear to this time?” Keith asked, even though he already knew the answer. Black of course. He’d gone to see Black.

Sighing, Shiro brought a nervous hand up to the back of his neck. “I- may have been too harsh with Allura-“

Keith hummed. He wasn’t so sure about that. What she had done- they all knew she had crossed a line there. Health was something you just didn’t mess with, especially when you were pretty much alone in the middle of the universe.

“-I needed to cool off, so I went down to see Black.”

Keith nodded as though the answer hadn’t already occurred to him. Black was Shiro’s buffer- his confidant- in a way. Shiro would do everything he could to avoid losing his temper in front of them, he didn’t like to colour their opinions of others with his own. Still, Keith mused, Shiro must

have thought it was really bad for him to go visit Black for that long.

He was about to say as much, but unknowingly or not Shiro beat him to it. He reached out and ruffled Keith's hair, and asked his own question before Keith had a chance to ask his.

"How are you doing?"

What a deceptively confusing question. Keith shrugged. "I don't—know? There's... there's so much that's happened in the past few days... Lance and I- We're- I just need some time to figure it all out."

Shiro's hand slid onto Keith's shoulder, and gave a slight squeeze. "Take all the time you need. No one can begrudge you that."

Keith hadn't even known it was there, but a small weight lifted at Shiro's easy response. "Thanks." He whispered.

"Are you two sure you want to try the headsets tomorrow?"

Keith grimaced. "Only if it doesn't endanger anyone else."

Shiro nodded. Keith knew it was a painful, but understandable decision.

"Have our techies found anything yet?"

Keith shook his head.

"It's still early," Shiro offered.

"I guess," he replied with a shrug. "Pidge said that she won't have anything definite 'till the morning anyway. She's been talking about having to calibrate equipment so that it will accurately take into account Lance's being human, as well as the human part of my DNA... and then she's still trying to figure out something for the Galra in mine too..." he sighed. "I'm just waiting for Pidge to give us the go ahead to leave. I know it's not even dinner yet but our internal clocks are still messed up, and Lance needs to sleep."

Shiro winced at the reference to their time as captives, then frowned. "Lance is sleeping. Yes a bed would be better, but he is sleeping." There was a pause, and they both knew what was coming next. "You need to sleep too. Don't think I don't know that neither of you slept much last night."

Keith shrugged.

"Keith- don't make me order you. As much as I don't want to, you know I will."

"I won't leave him alone," he said softly, "I can't." Keith shuddered, and in a thoughtless instant he fell back on old habits, and leant his head on Shiro's shoulder. As soon as he'd realized what he'd done, Keith froze- they hadn't done this in a while. Certainly not since Shiro had lost an arm...

Was it still okay, he wondered?

Beside him, Shiro relaxed into the contact, and that was more than enough for Keith. He melted into Shiro's side, and the strength to be found there. He just- he was tired, and needed someone else to be strong for a little while.

"Keith?" Shiro prompted softly.

“I don’t want to be alone,” he whispered, his voice thick. His right hand was pulled awkwardly behind him in Lance’s comforting grip, but he turned and buried his face in Shiro’s shoulder, a pitiful attempt to hide from any potential judgement. “Is there something wrong with me?”

“What?” Shiro turned his torso, and brought both arms up around Keith’s shoulders to pull him closer, resting his human hand gently on the back of Keith’s head. “No, Keith, no, there’s nothing wrong with you,” he soothed. “Why do you think that?”

“Because I never minded being alone before.” There was a terrified little pause. “They broke me, didn’t they? What years on the streets couldn’t do, they did in a few weeks.”

“Keith-“ Shiro said as he pulled away slightly, and touched his forehead to Keith’s. “We’re all a little broken. But that doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with you.”

Keith pulled in a shaky breath. “But it’s happening again-“

The flashbacks. The anxiety attacks.

“I know.” Shiro said, his voice soft. He ran his palms in a soothing motion up and down Keith’s arms, Keith shivered but relished in the warmth from the contact. “We’ll get through it. Like we did before.”

Keith bit his lip. The fact that Shiro had said ‘we’ comforted him more than he was willing to admit. “Are you sure? What if this is my brain leak?”

“That doesn’t matter. Whether it’s the same as it was before or something brand new, we’ll figure it out.”

After a minute Keith nodded, and then pulled in a stuttering breath. “I- I don’t want the others to know, okay?.”

“Keith-“ Shiro hesitated. “They all want to help. It’s going to be hard keeping something like this a secret. Especially if it has to do with the toxin.”

“I know but- just until I’ve got a hold of things again? Please, Shiro?”

Eventually, Shiro nodded. “As long as you remember that I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure you’re okay. Even if that does mean telling them.”

Keith nodded hurriedly. That had always been a part of their arrangement, way back when he was just a kid. It had struck him as odd the first time. When Shiro had said *that*, he’d wondered: Why did he care so much about *him*, a runt with no family, no manners, no future? What did he matter?

“What about Lance?” Shiro said softly “Will you tell him?”

Lance gently squeezed the hand that Keith had twisted behind him, and before he even realized it, Keith gave a small exhale of relief.

“He already knows.”

---

Lance and Keith migrated to the dining room for a late dessert as soon as Pidge and Hunk let them. It seemed as though the sweets hadn't been completely forgotten in the chaos of that afternoon, and Shiro wasn't that surprised when Lance started pestering Keith for the not-so-chocolate, not-so-strawberry, chocolate strawberry rolls that Hunk had worked magic with.

Keith, Shiro could tell, hadn't been that surprised either, and the two of them had quickly retreated to the dining room. The dining room where they still sat, hours later, and the room to which Shiro was currently bringing Hunk.

Shiro had a plan- and he wasn't sure if it would work- or explode in his face- but he had to try.

Both Keith and Lance showed worry at the idea of being separated as Shiro led them all down the castle corridors to their rooms, but Shiro knew that he had a decent argument.

"Right now you both desperately need sleep, and in proper beds," he told the two Paladins in question as they stood in the hall between their doors. "If this really doesn't work we'll figure out alternative sleeping arrangements; but Keith- I don't think you've slept in your bed at all since you've been back."

Keith looked unashamed at Lance's resulting horrified expression, then turned to Shiro, a pained pinch between his brows.

"Shiro, yesterday—earlier—I told you—and then this is what you suggest? Were you even listening?"

He sounded so hurt, and Shiro nearly balked right then. No- he had to stay strong, and explain his reasoning. "Of course I was. Hunk is going to stay with Lance—" Hunk nodded, his face almost comically stoic, "-and I'm going to stay with you."

"What- no, you've got better things to do—"

Shiro shrugged. "Not really. You guys will always be my first priority. This is top of my list."

"But—"

"Keith," Lance interrupted. "I'll be okay."

The Red Paladin looked at him nervously.

"Ok, I'm not going to lie- I might not like the idea, but I'll be okay. Nothing is going to get better if we're both exhausted, you know? You need to sleep too."

"Lance—" Keith said slowly.

Lance threw his arms around Keith, pulling them both into a much needed hug. "I'll be okay," He whispered, his chin resting on Keith's shoulder "If Shiro thinks that this might help, that we might be able to sleep better if we're not constantly waking up to help each other—"

Keith ran a comforting hand up and down Lance's back. "Are you sure?"

Lance shrugged "I don't know. But it's worth a try. Please?" The Blue Paladin's voice was so small, but so full of emotion it was no wonder that Keith nodded. Shiro couldn't imagine anyone denying a plea like that.

"Alright, but if you need me—"

“Hunk knows where to find you, and Shiro knows where to find me,” Lance finished, as he pulled away with a sigh. “Besides, your room is right next door. If something happens-“

“We’ll know.”

With a pained grimace, Lance nodded. “Now sleep, alright? I’ll have you know sleep is an integral part of self-care.”

Keith almost smiled at that-

The corners of his lips definitely twitched upwards.

Lance stood outside his door with Hunk until Keith had walked inside his own room, and Shiro smiled at the younger boy.

‘Thank you,’ he mouthed. Lance nodded.

“Make sure he actually sleeps; he’s good at faking it.”

Shiro hated that Lance knew that.

He hated that during their time in that cell Keith had thought he needed to pretend to sleep for Lance’s sake, and hated that he’d done it enough that Lance could tell the difference.

Shiro nodded. “I know,” he said quietly.

Lance nodded once, seemingly satisfied. As he turned to step his own room, the door closed behind him with a soft *snick*.

The sound made Shiro anxious.

Keith’s door closed the same way.

## Chapter 6

### Chapter Summary

“So how bad is it? The ‘leak’ in our brains?”

### Chapter Notes

Thanks to my Beta Dragon\_Stone, who regardless of classes still managed to get this to me :-D, thanks to Lauren for the late night talks regarding key plot details, and Maddie for the constant encouragement.

Just a note; i am currently on vacation 5 time zones from normal so you probably wont be getting another chapter until mid June. My apologies in advance, but wifi and time to edit are both scarce as hell :D

I hope you guys enjoy the pain, because it only really goes downhill from here XD

---

Neither Shiro nor Hunk slept that night

The next morning found them exhausted, but somewhat satisfied at least that their “charges had slept. Well, mostly slept, kinda.

Shiro stayed in the kitchen after breakfast to help Hunk with the cleanup- (which Hunk seemed to volunteer for no matter the meal,) and it gave the two of them a chance to talk about the night before.

Hunk slid the last plate in the space dishwasher, shut it, then leant back against the counter and closed his eyes.

Shiro put his hand on his shoulder, smiling sadly. “Wanna talk?”

Hunk shrugged and looked over at Shiro, hopelessness was set painfully in his features. “I just-I don’t know how to help.”

Shiro knew that feeling all too well. “You’re there for him-“ Shiro offered, “sometimes that’s all you can do.”

“Yeah, that’s what Pidge said too. Lance kept- he was having really bad dreams, really bad ones, Shiro- and shouting-“ he inhaled shakily. “And there was nothing I could say or do. I tried Shiro, really I tried-” Hunk’s eyes brimmed with tears, and Shiro’s heart seemed to skip a beat to see such a kind soul wrought in such a way. “He was so scared, and I couldn’t do anything, sometimes it

even seemed like I was making things worse.”

“I believe you.” Shiro knew what he was talking about, because Shiro had tried too. If Lance had had a night that was anything like Keith’s, it had been long, loud, terrified, and frequently interspersed with vicious flashbacks.

“I’ve never been happier that the walls are soundproof.”

The air rushed out of Shiro’s lungs at the open admission of that sentiment, and the worst part was that he had thought the same thing himself. What kind of people were they, to be happy that their friend’s suffering could be contained so easily by Altean technology and architecture? How could he have asked Hunk to watch his best friend experience such pain? He had lost them in the first place, this should have been on his shoulders and no one else’s.

“I’m so sorry Hunk.” Shiro’s voice was barely audible. “I should never have–“

“I would have anyway, so don’t worry about it. There’s no way I wouldn’t have checked on Lance at least once during the night. You weren’t the only one who noticed their nightmares in the lounge a few nights ago.”

“Ah,” Shiro winced. “I- I shouldn’t have separated them,”.

“Maybe not.” Hunk shrugged, wiping his eyes dry with a sleeve, “But I know you had to try, and I’m always happy to help.” He froze, and Shiro found himself comfortably standing there for a minute or two, simply waiting until Hunk was ready to share what was bugging him.

“It was just a lot- worse than I’d been expecting, you know?”

Shiro nodded sadly

“But you couldn’t have watched both of them, Shiro, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

That was exactly what he was thinking.

“Do you–“ Shiro hedged, “Do you think they would be better off if we could find a room with two beds? Or with one bigger bed?”

Hunk gave it some serious thought before answering, which Shiro appreciated.

“I almost came to get you and Keith several times,” he started. “Each time, Lance told me not to; he argued that Keith needed his sleep more than he needed to have a safety blanket. I tried to tell him that he mattered too, but he refused to listen.” Hunk levelled his gaze at Shiro, deadly serious. “By the look on your face I’d guess that your night with Keith was similar.”

Shrieks, and full blown panic in every bone of Keith’s body, hot sweats out of nowhere, and the constant insistence, the flat out lies that ‘he could do this, he could do this’- that ‘Lance needs to sleep’-

He took a breath to steady himself. Yeah, Shiro’d say it sounded pretty similar. The only response he actually gave Hunk though, was a simple nod.

Hunk sighed. “Then yeah- I think it would be better. Don’t you?”

Shiro nodded again. “I shouldn’t have separated them in the first place,” he sighed. “Pidge asked me not to, Keith asked me not to, but I did it anyways... They just both needed to sleep, but-”



“No no no no no,” Hunk interrupted his self flagellation, “Shiro, don’t do that. It’s like- when you’re making cookies, and you have the option to add the chocolate chips, but you don’t have to? You can’t know for sure which you’re going to like more until you’ve tried both.”

He supposed Hunk might have a point. “We’ve tried the cookies one way- now lets try it the other and see if it’s any better?” Shiro concluded.

“Exactly.” Shiro received a warm smile from the Yellow Paladin. “I knew you’d get it.”

There was a silence as they both tried to gather the energy to move down the hall into the lounge, where Katie was no doubt waiting to tell them what she’d found.

“Do we-“ Shiro asked, “is there even somewhere that would work for them?” The beds were just so small, he’d prefer to be able to offer them a little more space.

“Oh yeah man- There’s this hidden control panel on the bottom of the wall by the beds in our rooms- I found it one time when I was looking for the spare bandana that Coran—“ he shook his head. “that doesn’t matter. Anyway the bed can expand right out of the wall! I spent a couple nights in the guts checking out the hydraulic system it uses, and it’s kind of like-“ he looked over at Shiro’s almost smiling face, and paused. “What?”

“I just- haven’t seen you so excited about something like this in a long time.”

Hunk shrugged. “I get excited,” he started fidgeting and looked down at his hands. “Sometimes I just like to keep it to myself, ya know?”

In other words, Shiro had been too immersed in himself when Hunk had made the discovery, and he hadn’t felt comfortable telling him. That wasn’t right, it should never have happened. They were just kids, and he’d let them all down in one way or another.

He just nodded. “Let’s go see what Pidge has found, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

---

Pidge still wasn’t there when Shiro and Hunk walked in, and Keith was beginning to get worried

“Relax.” Lance was sitting on the floor at Keith’s feet, his head against the Red Paladin’s thigh as he passed the time playing a simple game Pidge had programmed into the tablets.

Keith was sitting on the couch, watching Lance, and worrying.

“Pidge probably just forgot to set her alarm or something, just because she’s late, and missed breakfast... that doesn’t mean anything,” Lance babbled

“Hmm,” Keith grunted.

“Where’s Pidge?” Shiro asked, as he took the spot beside Keith.

Keith shrugged. “Dunno.”

Hunk immediately spun around. “I think I know where she is- Gremlin probably fell asleep at her

workstation again. I'll go get her."

Shiro nodded appreciatively, then turned to Keith.

"How are you guys doing?"

Keith looked down at Lance and nodded slightly, trusting him to answer for them both.

"We're alright I guess." Lance shrugged. "Rough night. Might uh- have to," he paused, searching for the right word, "postpone, working with those headsets."

Shiro nodded slowly, and placed a hand on each of their shoulders. "I'm sorry, that's my fault. I should never have insisted you two be separated."

Keith knew that both he and Lance agreed, but also knew that neither of them would ever say that. Shiro had only been trying to help- there was no point in making him feel even worse.

"I was talking to Hunk-" Shiro continued, "and we think we've got something that will work in the future. Apparently the beds can expand out from the wall."

Lance chuckled, and Keith felt all other emotions vanish to make way for the mass amounts of relief that comment spurred. One- they wouldn't have to deal with a night like last night again- apart. Two, He would have been absolutely fine with sharing a bed the way they were now, but if it was slightly bigger that meant there was less of a chance he'd wake Lance up in the middle of the night-

Lance's voice startled him from his reverie. "Altean tech; it really does grow on you, doesn't it?"

Wait, was that-?

Keith and Shiro simultaneously groaned, and Lance chuckled again. "Aw common- that was a good one!"

"Suure," Keith said as he played with Lance's hair, and for a moment the mood was lighter- almost like it had been before they'd been captured. "One for the ages."

"Have you talked to Allura yet?" Lance said suddenly, and the tension returned full force.

"No- Not yet," Shiro told them. "I actually haven't seen her since yesterday." Shiro stopped, and Keith could /feel/ the intensity of Lance's gaze. There was no doubt in his mind that he wouldn't let Shiro get away with stopping there. "Ugh- I was going to go find her," Shiro continued, "after Pidge told us what she found."

"But shouldn't she be here for that though? If only so that it doesn't look like we're trying to keep /her/ out of the loop?"

Keith stiffened at Lance's words, and then frowned. Lance was right, it was only the few of them up here in the castle; Allura had been way out of line- but it wasn't right for them to do the same to her as well.

"Well--"

"She was wrong, they both were. But, Shiro, how can we set a good example of how things need to work if we do the exact same thing? I may be many things, but I am not a hypocrite."

"Lance--"

Lance looked up at Shiro, and Keith felt something like pride at the look on his own face.

“Shiro,” he started, his voice small, “Keith and I have gone almost a month without seeing our family.”

Keith didn’t need to have known Shiro for as long as he had to read the expression that ran across his features at a statement like that. Guilt. Shiro hadn’t thought of the situation in that way.

He hadn’t meant to take that aspect away from Lance, or Keith- but Keith knew that it didn’t bother him nearly as much as it would Lance. As long as Lance was there Keith was fine, if Shiro was there that was even better. Lance however thrived on the energy of those around him, of the limitless love and passion that came from being a part of something so much bigger than an individual could ever be. For Keith, at least until recently, he’d been alright on his own knowing that what he did made a difference- however small. Lance needed others to feel that way. There were only seven of them on the ship to begin with- and between Allura and Shiro- in the past twelve hours those Lance thought he was allowed to rely on had been effectively cut down to four.

“Please?” he whispered.

*Please, Shiro, Keith thought, please realize that we aren’t asking you to forgive her, just to let her back in. Let her try to make this right. For Lance.*

“Oh.” Shiro’s eyes darted from Lance’s to Keith’s, and he recoiled slightly at what he saw in each of them. “Oh, yeah. Yeah, you’re right. Okay.”

Lance grinned, and tapped at his comms to talk to Hunk, and ask him to gather the Alteans too. Shiro looked around blankly for a moment, needing to get a hold of what had just happened.

Keith left his one hand in Lance’s hair, but moved to put the other on Shiro’s leg. “Thanks,” he barely whispered. His words were accompanied with a shy smile, and Shiro understood what he meant.

The Black Paladin’s gaze flickered softly to Lance below them on the floor, and he sighed.

“You guys are always my priority. Whatever disagreement Allura and I have- we’ll figure it out.”

“Don’t let her completely off the hook.” Keith advised.

Shiro raised an eyebrow

“What I mean is- we can’t let something like that happen again. Voltron- it’s too important for such big secrets. We can’t protect anything if we don’t trust each other.”

“I won’t let it happen again.” Shiro agreed, “And once we’ve- figured out how to deal with the after effects of this toxin-”

Keith glanced down at Lance, and stopped Shiro before he could get any further. There was something they needed him to know. “Shiro, I know being able to form Voltron is important and all-“

Shiro frowned.

“But we might not be the best choices of pilots anymore.”

“Keith, No.”

“I’m serious, Shiro. You should start looking for new Paladins.”

“No.”

“Shiro!”

“Keith, stop. We will not be looking for new Paladins, we already have you.”

“Shiro- this isn’t about what you want. It’s about the fact that if our messed up minds connect with yours, it might mess yours up too. And we can’t risk that.”

Lance nodded beneath him, and Keith took strength from the knowledge that they were in complete agreement. Not that they usually weren’t as of late.

“Keith...” Shiro warned

“Actually,” Pidge cut Shiro off, “Voltron won’t hurt anyone- in fact, it might even help,” She walked into the room yawning, having clearly heard the end of his and Shiro’s conversation. Close behind her followed Hunk, Coran, and Allura.

Both Alteans looked nervous- Allura more so, but they each took a seat without hesitation on the couch across from them, and turned to listen to Pidge attentively.

“Really?” Shiro asked Pidge, curious, and relieved.

“Yeah.” She turned to Keith. “I mean- Your thought processes are still—a little in flux? So close mental activity with the Lions could help those settle back into the old rhythms, rather than new ones. What’s really great is that you’re here with people who know and care about you guys. We’ve got almost the perfect setup for rehabilitation.

“Almost?” Shiro asked, “What else can we do?”

She bit her lip; he stared back at her evenly.

Eventually she sighed. Keith knew all too well that no one could withstand Shiro’s *look* for very long, not when there was something he wanted to know. “As much as I’d love to, there’s nothing we can do to alter the stress that comes with their-your-*our* predicament. Stress is something that has been... well, let’s just say, ‘not good’ in the past. But it’s not like we can post a big sign outside saying ‘Sorry Galra, no attacks today, we’re taking a sick day.’”

“We could always try?” Hunk added as he took a seat on the floor next to Lance. “I mean, they’ve got to be at least a little bit tired too, right?”

Lance shot him a grin, and Shiro couldn’t help but smirk slightly. “That would be nice, I agree, but somehow I don’t think it would work.” He frowned. “And the second thing?”

Pidge built her lip, and started fidgeting with her glasses. “It’s just all... a little late.” She apologized, looking straight at Keith and Lance. “I’m sorry, but most of what will happen or change already has. There are tiny processes that are still in flux, but for the most part...”

“The damage has been done.”

She nodded, apology and regret evident in all her features.

“So how bad is it? The ‘leaks’ in our brains?”

Silence was the only response Keith got, and the longer it went on the more nervous he became.

“Pidge?” Shiro prompted, and Keith knew that tone. Shiro had progressed from looks to prompts= this really wasn’t a question she didn’t get to answer.

“Nothing massive,” Pidge said after another moment. “At least not with your brain, Keith. Nothing that will directly affect your personality or quintessence or whatever... there are a few small areas that your brain is currently recalibrating, but nothing to worry about. If you find you can all of a sudden juggle though- don’t be surprised.”

“That won’t be anything new.”

“What!” Hunk spun around, wide eyed in order to scrutinize Keith. “I didn’t know you could Juggle!”

Keith shrugged. “It’s all about coordination,” he said, as if that cleared up any question of the validity of his ability.

Hunk pursed his lips in annoyance and was about to reply when Lance spoke up.

“Whoa whoa, wait up. You said ‘nothing massive’ with Keith’s brain. That means there is something up with mine. Something... big, right?” His voice grew smaller towards the end of his statement, and Keith moved his hand to sit supportively on Lance’s shoulder, placing pressure slightly, just to remind Lance that he wasn’t alone.

“I- ugh- well... Yeah.” Pidge looked over at Keith and Lance, sadness in her gaze. “You’ve got slightly more of a ‘leak’, if you want to keep calling it that.”

“How bad?” Shiro asked

“It’ll be noticeable. As I said before, it will affect the way his brain puts ideas together, how it interprets things... I’m actually surprised he hasn’t noticed it yet, even if we haven’t.”

Lance frowned, and seemed to lean back closer into Keith for comfort. “What am I supposed to be noticing though? I’m kinda flying blind here.”

Pidge shrugged. “It’s impossible to tell from the scans- but this isn’t going to be something subtle.”

“Subtle, being-?” Keith asked for clarification

“Well- Juggling I guess? I mean you could go years without noticing if you never tried. Think of it this way. The- leak—“

Lance sighed. “Just say it- please?”

“Say what?”

“The word you’ve been tap dancing around. Damage. The damage to our brains.”

“One- I don’t tap dance. And two- I’m not calling it damage because technically- it’s not. It’s just- its like someone re-wrote some source code- and the code still runs fine but you aren’t quite sure what the programmer was trying to do because they didn’t leave any-?”

She bit her lip at the blank stares around her and sighed. “Okay- so it’s like a different form of architecture within a building? It looks weird, and maybe out of place, and you might not know where it came from, but the building still stands.”

“So Keith gets a new paint job, and I get a new kitchen?”

Pidge rolled her eyes. “Of course you guys got that one. Yeah, something like that, except it’s not so much a new kitchen, as another kitchen entirely, in addition to the first.”

“Oh.”

“But this means he didn’t lose anything, right?” Keith looked up hopefully at Pidge.

She nodded slowly. “Against all odds, that does seem to be what the data indicates.”

“Then you’re both very lucky.” Allura spoke gently, and all heads turned to her. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Pidge, but it isn’t often that someone affected by this toxin loses nothing, and only gains.”

“Wait- gaining isn’t always good,” Pidge reminded her, “but yeah; I have a theory about that.”

The silence that followed was a clear invitation for her to continue. “The Lions,” she said simply.

“Oh?” Coran leaned forwards, interested. “Oh yes I see- hm! Intriguing!”

“Coran?” Allura asked.

“Correct me if I’m going on a different journey here, Pidge, but it’s possible that the Lions helped them maintain their sense of who they are, even without them knowing it. The Lions are magical beings after all- and Red in particular has gone great distances to save her pilot before. It’s possible they did something similar even though the distance was much too great for them to cover physically- psychically though- distance is more or less irrelevant. We saw that with Zarkon and his connection to the Black Lion.”

“The Blade of Marmora told us that Zarkon had the help of the Druids though.” Shiro frowned.

“I think that’s because it was him trying to contact Black, and not the other way around,” Pidge interjected. “The Lions are incredibly powerful- if they were to direct and focus their energies into something like this...” she shrugged. “I think they could absolutely do it.”

“So Blue and Red saved their minds from the toxin?” Shiro concluded

“Well-“ Pidge scrunched her nose, “impossible things are still impossible, and there is no *cure* for the toxin. But yes, I do think they tried to put their Paladins in the best possible position to *overcome* the toxin.”

Keith wasn’t sure what to think about that. He knew that Red cared- but this, this was so much more than he’d been prepared for. His heart seemed to swell, and instinctually he reached out for Red in the back of his mind. *Did you?* he asked, *can you do that?*

The space in the back of his mind was warm, and sent conflicting emotions, but regardless he understood. He always understood Red. *Regret, comfort, apology*. Trying to protect his mind, even in her limited way had been all she *could* do. She didn’t want to lose him- none of them wanted to lose their Paladins; apparently it had been a big deal to the Lions. Then Allura had sometimes tried to pilot her- there was something akin to annoyance at those last images, she was trying to *focus* and Keith had to hold back a chuckle. *Thanks girl*.

Lance spoke, and Keith knew from the warmth in his voice that he had just done the same thing, and probably had a very similar interaction. “Blue’s always got my back.”

“So they’re not in any danger?” Shiro, of course, always looking out for them.

“I don’t think so. Nothing we can avoid, anyway- unless they do something stupid in the course of a normal day, which to be honest would be *very* like them...” there was a round of chuckles and nods of agreement; Keith scowled and Lance shrugged. “Acting like things are the same as they used to be- even if they’re not, is probably the best thing for their brains.”

Shiro nodded, and then looked at Keith, as though waiting for an answer.

Keith nudged Lance, and with tired eyes got a nod of his own. “Yeah, alright. We’re good to go. Did you still want to start with the Headsets?”

Shiro frowned- “Only if you’re sure, Keith- Lance.” He looked down at the Blue paladin, and Keith replied for them both.

“Yeah, we’re sure.”

Shiro nodded slowly. “Alright.”

“We’re doing this?” Pidge asked excitedly, and Keith actually relaxed at the warmth in her voice.

“It looks like it- unless there’s something else we don’t know about?”

“Nope! But if you think I’m passing up this opportunity to get more data....”

Shiro chuckled, but snuck a subtle glance at Keith.

*Is that alright?* he seemed to ask, and Keith nodded.

“Sweet!” Pidge grinned as she jumped up. “Just give me a little while- just a few minutes to set up some equipment?” She ran out of the lounge, and the rest of them cast around amused looks at the antics of their brilliant youngest member.

Just as Shiro was about to speak again, Pidge stuck her head back through the doorway-

“I’ll call you all when I’m ready—Hunk!”

He looked up, and she eagerly waved him forwards before running off again.

The Yellow Paladin shot them an apologetic look, and Lance rolled his eyes but chuckled. “We all know who really calls the shots around here.”

“Who- wait... Pidge?” Hunk asked innocently.

“Well duh!” Lance grinned.

“No-no-no-no-“

“HUUUUUNNNK!” Pidge’s voice came echoing down the hall, and Hunk stood sheepishly.

Hunk opened and closed his mouth, then pressed his lips together in defeat. “Ahh... well. I- uh, you may be right about that-“ he waited another moment, before looking anxiously at the door way as though it would yell at him too. “Yeah. I gotta go. See you guys later!”

Hunk left. There was a brief second of absolute silence, before every person remaining in the room burst out laughing.





## Chapter 7

### Chapter Summary

Family bonding time calls for board games. :D

### Chapter Notes

So finally- the next chapter! <3

I hope you nerds enjoy the mass of fluff. Yes- I actually made a monopoly board and everything. If you want schematics or pictures just shoot me a message.

Enjoy, because ch 8 is pure pain. I'd say i'm sorry, but im not.

A big thanks to Dragon\_Stone my amazing beta.

In response to a comment from Kaladan on ch 6 that i thought i should put up here for all to see —That analogy segment was actually in part inspired by my favourite fic of all time, /Force Over Distance/, which a couple of years ago was removed from everywhere on the internet. Clearly it made a big impact on me- so shoutout to Cleanwhiteroom if anyone else has had the pleasure of reading their work or knows the author. It was one of the most magnificently written pieces of literature i've read, and i have a degree in this shit. :-P

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“So we’re not gonna do all those wacky head exercises?”

Shiro shook his head at Lance’s question. “No, I thought we’d just, well, wear them.”

Keith looked over at him incredulously. “Wait- you want us to just, put them on?”

Shiro nodded. “I want to start small, and I figured the low level mental connection that the headsets give us was a good place to start. “

Lance shrugged and grabbed a headset from Hunk’s arms, placing it on his head. He then reached nervously for one of the monitoring bracelets that Katie held out. Shiro noted that she held five of them; not two.

He took his bracelet from her grasp, looking at her curiously.

“I might as well get a full data set from our interactions with the headsets,” she explained at his expression. “These will monitor- well, pretty much everything. You never know when it might come in handy down the road.”

“Yeah, it would have been helpful right about now.... You know, just as an example...” Hunk offered.

Shiro shrugged, and slid the black bracelet easily onto his wrist. Pidge and Hunk made a valid point; they could never have too much data. “Colour coded, I see.”

“Obviously,” Katie snarked, and held the green one close to her chest. With a smirk in Shiro’s direction her eyes settled on her tablet; then she frowned and looked up. Katie blanched, her eyes widening. “Oh, quiznack,” she said softly.

Shiro turned to follow her gaze and saw Keith across the room fidgeting with his bracelet, while Lance had simply put his down and was looking over Hunk’s shoulder as he set something up.

“The cuffs,” Pidge whispered.

Shiro could remember all too well how he’d had to cut the seemingly solid cuffs from around their wrists when they’d finally found them in their prison. He knew the scars lingered, poking out from beneath their sleeves even now when he glanced, thick, pale jagged bands around one of each of their wrists .

“I- I just altered tech that we already had,” she continued quietly. “I was in a rush- I didn’t think about-“

Shiro took a breath then looked closer at his ‘bracelet’. The material was flexible, like a large elastic band with a seamless clasp, and made out of a material that Shiro couldn’t identify. Testing its pliability, he turned to Pidge. “Does it have to go around the wrist?”

“No,” she said thoughtfully, “I guess not. You thinking ankle?”

Shiro nodded. Looking back at the boys, he noticed that Keith was putting the bracelet on his other wrist- the one that hadn’t been mutilated. Shiro caught his attention as he sat down on one of the couches, and tapped his ankle. Keith pursed his lips, then closed his eyes and gave his wrist a firm shake, deliberating. After a moment he smiled thankfully at Shiro, then shook his head.

Shiro took that to mean that Keith thought he’d be okay as long as the bracelet was on the other hand. Lance, maybe not. Shiro looked over at the Blue Paladin at nearly the same time as Keith, and as he watched Keith tapped on Lance’s shoulder, then pointing at Shiro.

Shiro repeated the action for Lance, and the Blue Paladin’s face lit up in relief. He quickly reached back and grabbed the bracelet- now anklet, and fit it on his right leg, shot Shiro a dazzling smile, then went back to watching Hunk.

Hunk, having adorned his head and wrist, sat down on the floor, and pulled out a hologram projector. Shiro watched curiously as the Yellow Paladin pulled out a bag of lovingly shaped tokens- brightly coloured miniature lions that were each about the size of a thimble- and set them on the floor before shuffling through what looked like a deck of cards.

Lance grabbed a card, started reading it, and Shiro could feel the effect from the headsets as he experienced the slightest of twinges of excitement from the younger boy.

“Oh. My. God. You finished it?”

“Sure did!” Pidge grinned as she sat beside them, clearly relieved at Shiro’s easy solution to the vitals monitor problem, and grateful to move on to more cheerful things.

Shiro frowned, puzzled, and when he looked up he saw that Lance had already spun around to explain it. “Monopoly!”

“Mon- Wait, the board game?”

Lance nodded hurriedly.

“And we’re going to...” Shiro looked around, “play?”

“Well, duh.” Lance smiled.

Shiro looked over at Pidge and Hunk, eagerly setting up the game, and he felt Keith’s amusement as he watched them argue over house rules. Keith caught Shiro staring, and shot him a small grin.

Shrugging, Shiro sat down. Reaching for one of the cards- which appeared to have an image of food goo on the back?- He started to read. “Keith punches Iverson in the face, so the Garrison needs the extra detention space. Get out of Jail Free.” Shiro chuckled, and Keith turned red.

“I- well-“ Keith spluttered.

Katie turned to challenge him, daring him to call her out, and he huffed.

“They never *actually* locked me up!” Keith defended himself.

The rest of them started giggling.

“That’s okay,” Hunk consoled him, “Teachers put me and Lance in detention loads of times. You weren’t missing anything.”

Pidge rolled her eyes. “Yeah, but that’s ‘cause punching Iverson got him locked out of the school, not in it.” She grinned, and Keith shot her the look of a betrayed puppy.

“I trusted you with that information!” He exclaimed in mock offence.

“Oh, come on,” Pidge teased, “It’s not like we all didn’t know it anyway, we’re not idiots.”

Keith huffed again, but couldn’t hide the amusement he felt. The warmth at a sense of belonging, the shared teasing and good natured humour.

Maybe, Shiro thought, maybe these headsets would work out after all.

Two hours later, he and Lance were locked in a fierce battle for second place. Katie was absolutely ruthless, and clearly going to win. Keith and Hunk had long given up any hope at winning and were just trying not to mortgage all of their properties. Lance was surprisingly good, always one step ahead of Shiro, and Shiro was constantly balanced right on the edge of conquering or being conquered.

The headsets gave them all the same advantages, theoretically, but Lance seemed to make better use of the errant feelings and wisps of emotion than the rest of them.

“Don’t you dare,” he said at one point, spinning on Hunk.

“What?” Hunk asked.

“Give Pidge Altea for Earth.”

“But I would get a completed colour set,” Hunk said naively, and Pidge waved the Light-Blue card temptingly in the air.

“And she would turn around and trade with me, effectively forcing me to give her my Green in exchange for her new Pink, and the Yellow that she knows I want so badly.”

“Ok..?” Hunk said slowly

“Wouldn’t it be better,” Lance smiled mischievously, “if you and I just swapped Pink and Orange, and forced her to pay a *little more* than a simple Yellow property to get that Green set?”

“Or, you know,” Katie suggested, “you could just give Shiro the Yellow that you have, Lance, and then maybe he’d be willing to give me Talwar-Six in exchange for *my* Yellow so that I can complete my Dark-Blue set...”

“NOPE! Nope-nope-nope, not gonna happen. Shiro knows better than that, right Shiro?”

Shiro smirked. “I’m kinda- how did you say it earlier, Lance? ‘Emotionally attached’, to Talwar-Six, Pidge.” He chuckled, “It’s going to take more than that to get me to give it up.”

She narrowed her eyes. “See, I know you’re lying because I can *feel* that you aren’t attached to it. But at the same time, I know that you’re not going to give it up just for the Yellows, are you?”

“UM, GUYS!” Lance huffed. “You can’t trade when it’s not your turn. So shush. Hunk.” He turned to face the bewildered Yellow Paladin. “Do you wanna trade your Pink for my Orange or not?”

Katie shook her head wildly, and Lance held out the Orange card in front of Hunk.

“Uhh, okay?” Hunk said tentatively, and before he could blink, the Pink card was out of his hand and he was holding an Orange one.

Keith sighed. “At least now you have a full colour grouping. All I’ve got are these lousy HUBs. Pidge-“ he turned his head, “have I pointed out yet that the Space Mall and the Swap Moon are the *same thing*?”

“YES,” Katie grumbled, and they all felt just a tad of her good natured annoyance in their minds. “Live with it. Besides, the HUBs are keeping you alive, aren’t they?”

“If by alive, you mean surviving on the little rent I get when one of you happens to land on one,” Keith grumbled, “and the 200GAC I get every time I pass ‘Form Voltron’-”

Pidge smirked. “That is exactly what I mean.”

“I told you you should have traded Shiro for the Teleduv when you had a chance,” Lance teased Keith, “If you had both utilities you’d be alright. As it is...” he grimaced and Shiro couldn’t help but smile at the good natured humour that flowed through the link.

Four hours in, everyone had conceded the first win to Katie, and after a short break for lunch, they started up a new game. Lance and Keith teamed up, but Hunk didn’t like the idea of Katie teaming

up with Shiro, so eventually they played Yellow and Black, against Red and Blue, against Green.

Katie won again.

Seven hours in, Lance challenged Pidge to a head to head game, and Hunk wandered off to find more snacks.

Shiro and Keith settled in to watch Katie and Lance go at it, making jokes and teasing with the extra benefit of having access to their feelings on the game as well. After only a pass or two of their lions around the board, Hunk returned carrying buckets of popped kernels- or at least something very similar- from one of the planets they'd visited.

Eight hours after they first started, the audience was well into their fourth batch of 'popcorn' when Pidge and Lance arbitrarily decided that the winner would be determined by other means.

Lance grabbed Keith's bowl, Katie grabbed Hunk's, and they left Shiro and his bowl untouched as they started throwing handfuls at each other.

Lance kept trying to reach forwards and drop a handful down the back of Katie's tunic. More often than not he was successful, and Katie simply squirmed or twisted out of his way as she lined up her next shot. At first, Shiro didn't understand why Pidge didn't retaliate in turn- he'd seen her use that very technique before. Instead she'd throw her popcorn, a lot of it, and hard, -she'd even throw soggy kernels- but she didn't reach forward, and rough-house with Lance like he did she.

Maybe, Shiro thought, maybe it was a sense of pride, or gamesmanship? That Pidge didn't want to let herself sink to Lance's level? Then he thought about her ruthless, cheating strategies for the last eight hours, dismissed that conclusion, and was forced to consider another option.

It wasn't that she *couldn't* retaliate in the same way, Shiro realized, but rather that she *wouldn't*.

They'd all noticed Lance's flinches and hesitation when they moved too close to him over the past few days, and it was even worse when he didn't see it coming. There was no way he wouldn't be expecting the contact now, but she still wouldn't risk anything happening.

Shiro actually reached up to take off his headset for a few moments so that he could contain his understanding of the situation before Lance or one of the others felt it.

In the end, almost directly because of her refusal to cause Lance even a chance of unease, Katie declared Lance the winner.

"Stop!" she giggled, "It's so itchy; you win!"

Lance whooped in victory, and gave Keith a high five.

Katie left to change her shirt, and Hunk to gather Allura and Coran for dinner. Shiro busied himself using a piece of Altean technology that may or may not have been intended for use as a vacuum, but seemed to do the trick.

As soon as Pidge returned, Lance started quizzing her on game techniques, and as they moved on from /Monopoly/ to a plethora of other board games Shiro had only vaguely heard of before. He watched and listened to their conversation with half his attention, the other was on Keith as he slid from Lance's side to move a little closer to Shiro, and started talking quietly.

"I noticed that you took your headband off for a bit. You saw too, then? What Pidge did?"

Shiro nodded slightly.

Keith took a breath, and shot Shiro an appreciative glance. “Thanks,”.

Shiro smiled sadly, and nodded. There wasn’t much else to say.

Coran and Allura entered the room with Hunk, and with the assistance of a few floating trays, they helped him bring a fondue-type meal to the lounge for dinner.

“Thanks to Kaltenecker - and a few spare pieces of Altean equipment that I put together- we can have cheese fondue!”

Allura looked delighted at the prospect of the meal that she helped to direct on the floating trays, while Coran was sniffing it suspiciously.

“It’s like a... sauce...?” he asked tentatively.

“It can be a sauce,” Hunk explained, “but it’s still cheese. Remember, we had some with dinner the other night?”

“Right...” Coran was still looking at the fondue like it would suddenly attack him- which wasn’t surprising, given some of the things that had come out of the kitchen under Coran’s guidance previously - all in the name of Altean Food.

---

Nearing the end of their meal, Keith was beyond thankful that Shiro had heeded Lance’s advice and taken his headset off before dinner, even if the rest of them hadn’t.

It was kinda nice, after all, having the ability to check in on everyone instantly- and the headsets only magnified the sense of camaraderie and family that they were renewing after his and Lance’s... time away.

There had been a flicker in the lighting. Nothing more. Barely even a moment, a millionth of a tick. Shiro, Allura and Coran had immediately engaged in a discussion and pulled out tablets, checking the systems to see what was up with the castle. They hadn’t noticed, hadn’t truly realized what the repercussions of that flicker were in that instant, because they weren’t connected via headset.

Not like the rest of the Paladins were.

The light flickered, followed by a moment of sheer terror.

Lance’s terror.

Pidge acted first, yanking off her headset and reaching for Hunk’s next to her as it clattered harshly to the ground. Then she reached for Lance’s headset on her other side, and he lashed out at her. She was barely able to duck out of the way in time.

Keith watched everything in front of him in horror, unable to move. He could feel Lance’s fear, and his mind wasn’t able to work out how he was both *afraid* and *not afraid* at the same time, and there was too much information happening and not happening, and all he wanted to do was move,

but he couldn't move because he was scared, but then he wasn't scared and his body wasn't obeying the signals from his brain and he *couldn't move*. It was a tick or two at most, but it was too much—

Suddenly he was gasping for air, and found himself already clumsily moving towards Lance. Lance- he had to make sure that Lance knew what was happening. In his peripherals he noted Shiro was holding the red headset, and briefly wondered why.

There was muttering behind him, and later he would learn that Allura had left to figure out what had caused the power fluctuation; but right then he didn't care.

"Lance," Keith said desperately, grabbing his hand and holding it tight.

"Keith." Lance's eyes flicked around the room, and his form was tense. "What was that- are they coming? Are they-"

"No, they're not. We're on the Castle, remember?"

Lance closed his eyes and took a deep breath, nodding.

"Lance, look around."

Lance did as Keith asked, and his breathing slowed. "Oh. Right." Lance looked down at his shaking hands, embarrassed to have forgotten.

"Hey, it's okay," Keith soothed. "You're fine, I'm fine. It's over."

He let Lance pull him into a hug, and rested his chin on Lance's shoulder. After a minute Lance took a shuddering breath of relief, and squeezed a little harder just before pulling away.

"Dessert?" Lance asked meekly, and got a few smiles from the party at his attempt.

"Coming right up!" Hunk announced softly.

## Chapter 8

### Chapter Summary

This was no 'Space TV'

### Chapter Notes

Surprise! 2 chapters, one update. :D

There is a reason for that. This chapter has a very dark theme, and if you're worried about triggers please feel free to skip it.

This chapter includes: Torture, Blood, Vomiting, disassociation, broken bones, dislocation of joints, unsolicited contact, (nothing overtly sexual or intimate, but creepy in an icky way.), self harm, (but no desire for self harm), and feelings of worthlessness or inadequacy. There is also the description of certain sounds that people could find unsettling or triggering. If you are at all worried, please be safe and skip this, it won't change the story.

If you do plan on skipping, and want to know what happens; Hunk basically finds the videos of Lance and Keith's capture that Pidge got ahold of, and watches one from start to finish.

Thanks to my tank of a Beta Dragon\_Stone for the brilliant editing.

You have been warned, please be safe guys.

---

There was something Pidge was keeping from him; it'd been bugging him for days.

So Hunk did the only obvious thing to do. He started snooping. Through her room, her workstation, her tablet—

She wasn't telling him and he needed to know; so he would just have to find out for himself.

At the end of their 'day of games', Pidge was distracted enough that Hunk finally managed to swap out her tablet with his. He made a beeline for the kitchen, and took his few moments of privacy to... browse.



“Hmmm.” He hummed to himself as he saw the large amount of recently loaded videos in the history. “Space TV, Pidge?” he asked with a slight grin.

He tapped on one of the most recently watched files, and it opened up a video screen.

He flinched and closed it instinctively before it even had time to play.

That was-

That was Lance. And Keith. Chained up.

He turned to the nearest garbage receptacle- (he knew where they all were,) and barely managed to hold back the bile.

That wasn't Space TV.

Hunk took a deep breath, and opened the file again. On the screen showed footage taken from a camera mounted high above the subjects. By one wall, Lance stood- a little shaky with a wrist chained to the wall and leg that was clearly injured, but standing nonetheless. By the opposite wall, Keith was curled up on the floor. In the corner opposite the viewer, and between the two captured Paladins hunched an Alien, large and naturally armoured, with long claws and unblinking eyes.

Hunk didn't turn up the volume- and he wouldn't, not if he wanted to keep the contents of his stomach where they were; it was bad enough that he could tell the camera angle would be more than enough to let him read their lips. As calmly as he could, Hunk reached up, and made sure that his headset was turned off. No one else needed to know what he'd found, or what he was feeling right now.

Hand shaking, he hit 'Play'.

Both of the paladins were bloody and bruised, and the numerous blood stains and tears in their clothing, painted an ugly picture in Hunk's mind . They were clearly malnourished and exhausted, but Lance at least seemed to be aware of what was happening around him. Keith-

-less so.

Hunk checked. According to the space date and time on the file, it had been recorded about a week into their capture.

An- alien- approached Keith, sneering, and Keith curled smaller into himself as he lay with one wrist chained awkwardly to the wall above him. If he was standing, the cuff would hang against the wall at about hip height. The alien lazily reached out, and with no apparent provocation pulled one of its sharp claws down the Red Paladin's side. Even at the distance that the footage had been taken from, Hunk could see the blood begin to well and drip to the floor, adding to the stains already there. A sizeable line cut into Keith's flesh from his neck to his thigh, and as soon as the claw touched his skin Keith writhed. He tried to get away from the alien, to pull back from the source of pain, but his spine was literally to the wall. There was nowhere for him to go. He shuddered, and as the alien finished its play and lifted its claw away. Keith stared fixedly at the floor, tracing a pattern into the blood and dust.

The whole time, Lance was waving his arms frantically. He was talking, yelling, clearly doing his best to provoke the alien. Lance was trying everything and anything he could, Hunk knew, to stop the alien from hurting Keith any more than it had already.

The alien narrowed its eyes, fixing Lance with its frigid stare. Baring its teeth, it spun around and

started talking to him. Hunk wasn't sure how, but Lance's skin seemed to pale the longer the creature spoke. As it stopped conversing Lance shook his head fiercely, and snapped a determined response at the alien.

Unsatisfied with the answer it received, the creature gave a gruesome grin, then turned and slowly unfurled another talon from its claw to add to the first. It held them hovering just above the Red Paladin's skin, as if to taunt Lance with the knowledge that there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Lance's mouth opened, and the creature was all too happy to respond by pressing its claws into Keith's flesh. It dragged its ragged nails down Keith's side again, two new lines of blood appeared to match the first. A gruesome set of racing stripes that shredded his shirt and skin alike.

Keith stopped tracing shapes on the ground, shivered, then brought his free hand up to try and stop the bleeding- first at his neck, then over his ribs, then he moved back up to cup a hand awkwardly around the bleeding at the base of his neck. When the creature noticed, it simply grabbed his hand in one of its claws and squeezed tightly. Keith threw his head back in pain as he yanked his hand away, and held the bloody and bruised- (and probably broken) extremity close to his chest.

In the other half of the cell, Lance screamed for Keith. He flinched every time Keith flinched; Hunk knew that Lance was always such an empathetic person, he knew that it was *hurting* him to not be able to help. The creature watched- amused- as Lance pulled at the cuff that was chaining him to the wall, watched as Lance yanked until his wrist and hand were dripping with blood, until the edges of the metal cuff had bit so deeply into his wrist that Hunk worried he'd cut through muscle.

Lance was always so protective, even at the cost of his own well-being. This alien it seemed, had either learnt or been told that the best way to hurt Lance wasn't to torture him physically, but instead to make him watch as someone he cared for was hurt instead.

Hunk's heart clenched.

On screen, Lance half-heartedly tried to use the extra lubrication to pull his wrist through the cuff, but clearly didn't expect any success. The blood coated and dulled the shine of the cuff, but Lance's wrist stayed firmly locked where it was.

The creature smirked as it witnessed Lance's self-inflicted pain. Eventually- when it determined that Lance was done trying to escape his restraints, it said something that caught Lance's interest. The creature spoke, and its talons rested the top of Keith's neck, hovering threateningly just underneath his ear. The action was perversely gentle. It looked like it *cared* what was going to happen to Keith, but for all the wrong reasons.

Lance screamed and shook his head, tears flowing freely. He was pleading, his face twisted in agony and need, begging it to stop what it was doing. He lashed out, throwing his free arm towards the creature in the hopes of landing a hit, and when that failed he switched to kicking as far out as his legs would let him.

He didn't come anywhere close to hitting his target.

The being continued to speak, enjoying the game it played, taunting him.

As Hunk watched, he could see more than just Lance's physical form starting to break. The cool façade, the powerful diplomat, the peacekeeper and the negotiator was crumbling. His words weren't of any use, he couldn't help. The creature was making Lance feel powerless in the worst

way possible.

It spoke again, and this time Lance leapt at it in a fury, just to come to a sudden halt when the chain around his wrist held him back.

Hunk was paralyzed as, undeterred, he saw Lance throw himself again at the creature.

And again.

Lance screamed, and launched himself completely into the action, like Lance threw himself against anything he set his mind on.

Keith didn't react, but the creature pulled his head up, forcing the Paladin to look at it. Keith winced and tried to pull back- without success.

Again and again, Lance moved with all of his energy, fuelled by all of his emotions as he launched his body weight against the chain around his wrist-

Hunk knew his best friend. Lance was using his fear of failure, a desperation that came from a lack of control, the pain that he and Keith both felt- both physically and psychically-, the hopelessness of capture, the need to be worthy, the care for his *family*, the anger toward the creature, the loss of freedom, the rejection he feared, and the hope he so desperately needed to get through this-

Lance threw every ounce of what he was feeling into every move he made, and pulled against the wall again and again and again-

-then collapsed.

Hunk could almost hear the sickening *crack* as he watched Lance's shoulder dislocate, saw his arm elongate unnaturally and watched as the Blue Paladin fell to the floor in agony. There were a few moments of stillness, and then as soon as Lance could control his breathing, he stood and started throwing himself towards the being again. Hunk noticed that the dislocation gave Lance just enough reach to almost touch the creature-

Oh god, Lance—

Hunk coughed back a dry sob just watching the tablet, and looked away for a moment to wipe his eyes and swallow down his gag reflex.

Lance-

It was morbid, but Hunk didn't have it in him to stop the playback; they had lived it, the least he could do was see—

Lance was now crumpled at the base of the wall; his knee was at least double the size that it should have been, and the new injury appeared to prevent him from standing anymore.

The torturer had started to draw Keith's blood through another slow set of incisions from its claws- three of them this time-

Keith, delirious and in as much pain as he clearly was as he cradled his shattered wrist to his chest, flinched at just the wrong moment. Suddenly there was a strong spurt of bright red blood from his neck. A puddle started to expand quickly beneath him, and Hunk gagged.

One of the claws had clearly nicked an artery. The monster pulled back, seemingly disappointed

that its fun would be ending so quickly, and made a strange motion to someone off screen.

Lance was screaming bloody murder. He pulled himself across the floor, redoubling his efforts to break or get rid of the cuff that was chaining him away from Keith, trying to reach out to the Red Paladin, to somehow, impossibly, get to him, so that he could stop the bleeding. So that he could save his friend.

Hunk gagged again, and lost his dinner.

There was so much blood.

So much-

Red. Everywhere.

When he turned back to finish watching the feed, Keith had stilled where he lay in the cell. Hunk couldn't tell if he was breathing or not. Lance was leaning, one arm reached as far out as he could grasping at thin air in Keith's direction, pulling at the end of his chain. He ignored the monster as it loomed above, watching him with a sick satisfaction. Instead, Lance simply reached out for Keith; begging him, pleading with him to do something.

To wake up, Hunk read through the pain that twisted Lance's words.

For Keith to fight. To stay. To live.

The monster looked right at the camera, gave a short nod, and swiftly knocked Lance unconscious with a blow to the back of the head.

The feed stopped.

Hunk took one shuddering breath, two, then turned and heaved again into the garbage. There was nothing else left in his stomach but regardless he heaved painfully.

That- that happened near the end of the first week.

Keith had almost died- right in front of Lance. Maybe he had died, Hunk didn't know how much damage the device their captors had had could repair.

Lance had been literally pulling his own bones from their sockets to get even a few inches closer to Keith.

That had been week one. There had been three more. Three more weeks of that.

Oh God—

Lance.

Keith.

They'd lived like that every day for *almost a month*.

Hunk closed the file, and would have deleted it if he'd thought it would do any good.

Suddenly, things made sense. Keith and Lance- He'd known that they'd been through hell, but seeing it was something entirely different.

It was too real. They were at war, Hunk knew that; but this was next level awful even by Galra standards.

Other things started to make sense too as he added them up in his head. Why Pidge had gotten so mad at Allura. Why she'd been so protective, so friendly and accommodating and willing to do anything for the sake of Keith and Lance, but she barely spoke to anyone else if the boys weren't there. Why no one had seen her around the castle, why she didn't stay long in any social setting. Hunk'd thought she was just really focused on figuring out what had happened because of the toxin; because she wanted to know more.

Really, it was because she knew *too much* of what had happened.

The games that afternoon, Hunk realized, was the longest period of time he'd seen Pidge in one place since they'd gotten Lance and Keith back. Even when she and Hunk were running the tests on the boys, she'd been oddly quiet. Less snarky, and constantly moving from one room to another to work on her tablet, forcing him to follow her around the castle if he wanted to go over data with her.

No wonder Pidge hadn't told him about this. He wouldn't have told her in a million years. He wouldn't wish watching the video, let alone the torture Lance and Keith had endured on his worst enemy.

Pidge had watched all of the videos; probably so that he and Shiro wouldn't have to.

Hunk fidgeted with the headset, still turned off around his temple, and bit back another gag reflex at the thought of how to go back to the lounge and act as though he didn't know what he knew.

No wonder Pidge wasn't sleeping.

No wonder Lance and Keith couldn't sleep.

He knew that he wouldn't be sleeping properly for a while either.

Maybe something warm and comforting would help them all. Cooking always helped him think things through; maybe it would give him enough time to bury this information so deep in his subconsciousness that the others couldn't feel it. Pidge had figured out how, so he was sure that he could too.

He wondered if he had enough milk left for hot chocolate.

## Chapter 9

### Chapter Summary

Just a morning with Lance and Keith.

### Chapter Notes

Halla Guys.

So i'm apparently quite incapable of writing sustained fluff... or anything that isn't angst. I do apologize?

That being said, i hope that these next couple of chapters are at least a bit of a comforting balm before more shit hits the fan.

Oops.

Spoilers.

As always, mega thanks to my beta Dragon\_Stone, to Maddie and Lauren for telling me that im going overboard with the pain, (just for me to pretty much ignore them :-P XD) and to all of you who apparently love it as much as i do. You are the best.

Psychosei, you gotta let me know if im on track here... are these cuddles enough? Or more? :D

Thanks guys, and happy reading!

---

Keith woke up to-

something wasn't right.

Lance-

Lance was shaking, kicking and fighting with anything he could reach, imaginary or otherwise. Keith expertly ducked a flailing arm- even in his half awake state- then reached for Lance's hand, which had escaped from his own grip while they slept.

"Lance," he started quietly, "Lance, you need to wake up. Don't let her win." Gently, Keith

massaged the strong fingers that he held fiercely in his own, hoping to help Lance reconnect with reality on the castle, and push away the terrors that he was seeing.

Lance's hand tightened in his own, but his movements seemed to only grow fiercer. More determined.

"Lance, please-" Keith winced as he felt a foot connect with his shin, and knew it would bruise later. "Lance, I need you to wake up. Remember your family, waiting for you on Earth?" Keith asked, trying to get Lance to remember what he fought *for*, all the while keeping his voice as calm and reassuring as he could. "Remember your family on the castle? They found us, Lance; Hunk and Shiro and Pidge, Allura and Coran, they found us. And I'm here, Lance, I'm here, I'm not going anywhere."

Something, maybe his voice, his touch, or his words, or some combinations thereof finally made an impact. Suddenly Lance stilled his movements, opened his eyes, and glanced around the room frantically.

"What-Keith?"

"It's me, I promise. Not a hallucination. I'm here."

Lance reached forward to touch his face and quickly scanned his form, checking for any new injuries, "You're okay?"

Keith nodded. "I'm okay. We're on the Castle."

"The..." Lance actually looked around now to relate the visual evidence with what Keith was telling him, and nodded. "Right. Castle. Okay." He pulled himself up slightly, and took a deep breath. "That's good."

Keith sat up as Lance composed himself, straightening the sheets and blankets as best he could. As soon as he was done, Lance settled down, placing his head on Keith's thigh like a pillow. It wasn't what Keith had been expecting, but he really didn't mind.

"Talk to me." Keith hesitantly carded his fingers through Lance's soft hair.

Lance's breathing seemed to even out with Keith's touch, and he took that as an invitation to continue. "It was just- the normal stuff," he said faintly, "and some... new stuff." He gave Keith's hand a squeeze, as if to reassure himself of the Red Paladin's presence.

"New?" Keith asked worriedly. What did that mean? Was there something else he had remembered? How bad was it?

Lance shivered. "Yeah."

Keith waited for Lance to elaborate. After a few minutes passed and Lance offered nothing more, Keith prompted him for more information.

"How bad?" He tried to keep the stress and concern out of his voice, but Keith was pretty sure he'd failed miserably.

Lance shrugged.

"Lance, please, you're scaring me."

Lance looked up, alarmed, and brought his hand up to rest on Keith's cheek. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to," he sighed sadly, and slid his long arm around Keith's neck, pulling his head down so that their foreheads touched for a few moments.

It was another move that Keith hadn't been expecting, but found that he wasn't at all opposed to either.

"I didn't remember anything new- It's just in my dream- I couldn't see anything. I could feel things, and there were things that I knew, but I couldn't see *anything*." Lance shivered.

Keith's breath hitched. Lance was now having dreams that played on his claustrophobia? That wasn't *fair*.

"Lance," he started sadly, then abruptly changed direction, his resolve hardening. "What do you need from me?" he asked.

Lance shook his head. "Nothing really. You're here," he shot Keith a small smile and his eyes softened, "and that always helps. Knowing that you're alive, and safe, and free."

Keith nodded. It was the same for him with Lance. Just knowing that the blue paladin was no longer at the mercy of their captors helped him breathe easier.

"It's probably just because so much is happening at the same time, you know? My brain is having trouble handling all the information."

Keith thought it was a little more than that, but he'd let Lance have it.

"How's your brain handling everything?" Lance asked. "The toxin, these possible side effects- why Allura didn't tell us, not to mention what I've heard about Shiro when we weren't here...?"

Keith bit his lip. "What happened with Shiro; I need to have a talk with him about that, but mostly I-, mostly I'm just worried about you," he admitted.

"Don't be, I'll be fine," Lance said, trying to brush away his concern.

Keith shot him a look; he wouldn't let him get away with that for long, because they both knew it wasn't true. "You?"

Lance took a moment to answer "I'm worried about you. But I'm also scared that things will never feel normal again. Have you noticed the way the others look at us? Like they can't decide if it's safe to give us a hug? What am I gonna do- bite them?"

"They know you're not going to bite them."

"I know but- I'm not imagining it am I? You see them too?"

"Lance-" Keith wasn't sure how to say this. "That cell- we're both going to be dealing with that for a long time." He took a breath and looked Lance right in his big blue eyes. "You know that, right?"

"Of course. For one, these mysterious side effects of the toxin won't let us forget so quickly." His voice dropped, softer, "and I don't think the dreams are going to go away any time soon either," he finished dejectedly.

"No- that's," Keith squeezed his hand in support, and brushed Lance's bangs back softly as he lay in his lap. "That's not what I meant."



“Okayy?” Lance invited Keith to continue.

“Well- when it’s just us, it’s like nothing much has changed- I mean, things have obviously changed, but we’re used to it,” he smiled shyly. “But with the others...” Keith looked down nervously. “You do kinda- shy away from touch. You fix it almost immediately, and you clearly haven’t noticed, but it is- you know, noticeable. I do it too,” Keith hurried to say, “but I was never big on touch in the first place...”

Lance stopped, shocked, and his eyes suddenly glistened with tears. He took a moment to consider what Keith had just said, speaking again only when Keith reached forward to wipe a tear off his cheek.

“I do, don’t I?” The words seemed to have trouble coming out, and his voice cracked. “How did I not notice that?”

Tears were flowing freely now down Lance’s face, and Keith could only think of one thing. He reached down to pull Lance up into a hug, guiding his head down to rest on his shoulder. “Hey- it’s alright. It hasn’t been that long since you came out of the healing pod- I’m sure you would have realized soon.”

Keith had had the chance to watch a delirious and confused Lance interact with the other Paladins, to shy away from their touches and hugs. It was an unfair advantage if he’d ever heard of one.

“I’ve been hurting them though-“ his voice was choked with tears, and Keith pulled him closer. Damn it, why had this had to come up right after a dream like that? This wasn’t fair.

“No- shh, Lance,” he held the shaking Paladin in his arms, “you haven’t been hurting them. They get it, they’re just trying to give us the space we need to-“

“To get used to trusting again? To people not trying to hurt us?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“But they’re family,” Lance choked out. “I didn’t think- They would never hurt us. I know that.”

“Your mind doesn’t understand it that way.” Keith shivered, remembering for a moment another time when he’d dealt with something like this, and had it explained to him. It had been a long time ago; and Shiro had been the one to pull him through it then. It was his turn now to offer that type of support, and he was more than happy to. “Our brains- they taught themselves certain things for the sake of survival. It’s not your fault.

They stayed that way for a few minutes before Lance sniffled, and then pulled back. “I never thought of you as the comforting type,” he feebly joked.

“Me neither.” Keith gave him a shy smile. “C’mon, let’s get ready and see who’s in the lounge.”

Lance nodded, and they both stood.

Taking their turns in the washroom, Lance shot Keith an alarmed glance, and Keith smiled back reassuringly, he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Are you nervous?” Lance asked suddenly.

He didn’t need to clarify, Keith knew immediately what he was asking about. Last night when Shiro had dropped them off at the new room Coran had set up for them, the Black Paladin had

brought up the possibility of flying today after the success with the Headbands yesterday- If they were ready and willing.

Was he nervous? About flying? No. About the possibility of trying to form Voltron? Absolutely.

“A little,” he replied.

Silence.

“Why?” Keith asked.

“Because I was thinking about it, and... I’m not?”

“Alright...” Keith wasn’t sure where this was going. Why would that merit Lance’s look of alarm from moments before?

“But I should be, shouldn’t I.” Lance’s question came out as a statement of fact, and Keith wondered who he was really asking. Keith, or himself?

“Maybe,” Keith shrugged. “Lance- are you ok?”

“I’m not nervous about my ability to fly, or how it will make me feel, Keith, but I-I’m worried, you know? Like, deep in the gut worry. Deep down, I can’t help but feel something is going to go wrong-“

“Lance-“

“Please, please tell me I’m just overthinking things?” Lance begged, turning shakily towards Keith, “I know that there aren’t any pirates, or any planets even near here-”

“You’re overthinking things.”

“But-“

“Lance.” Keith reached from where he sat to take Lance’s hand and smooth it out, turning it over in his own. “I’m fine. You’re fine.”

Lance nodded, and sat beside him on the edge of the bed. “Just- don’t go rushing into anything without me- ok?”

Keith nodded as he brushed a hand up and down Lance’s arm to calm him. “Breathe Lance. We’re in the middle of nowhere, and no one knows we’re here. They won’t find us.”

“Right.” Lance inhaled slowly, then smiled. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I get it. You know I get it.”

Lance leant his head over onto Keith’s shoulder. They stayed like that for a while, just breathing, thanking the stars that they were both alive, and back home, and that they had each other.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Summary

Time to Form Voltron!

:-O

## Chapter Notes

All the love to my Beta, Dragon\_Stone, to all of you for coming back despite the promised pain, and to Lauren and Maddie for the most incredible of birthday celebrations.

Who's excited for the new season on August 10th? XD

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“Let’s start with getting you back in your Lions,” Shiro started once all the Paladins had all arrived in the lounge. “Nothing crazy, just- you haven’t flown in a while. Let’s remind your muscles of what they do best.”

Keith knew the grin that spread across his face was a little bit much, but he didn’t care. Flying would make many of his anxieties fade away for a while. He would be able to have Red right there, and Lance right there through Blue and Red, and empty space to just clear his head—

“Uhh-“ Hunk said, and Keith frowned. Out of all of them, Hunk was the last he’d expected to be voicing concerns. “Is that a good idea, Shiro?” Hunk continued.

“Pidge said that getting them back into a normal routine would help their brains- right?” Shiro looked to the Green Paladin for confirmation.

She nodded and shot Hunk an odd look herself. “Yep.”

“Okay then.” Shiro nodded, “Check your gear, make sure everything’s in order, and in a couple of hours, if you both feel up for it, we’ll head out.”

Keith sprung up off of the couch, pulling Lance up with him. The Blue Paladin chuckled at Keith’s excitement, and Keith grinned.

“Hey, Keiiiith.” Lance shot him a grin.

“Yeah?”

“Betcha I can make it to the hangars first!” Lance challenged, and shot out of the room without giving Keith time to reply.

“What- Lance!” Keith called, then raced to catch up, leaving the others where they were without a second thought.

A few halls later Keith nearly tripped over his feet, skidding to a stop when he saw Lance standing still in the middle of the hall.

“Lance?” he called, concerned as he quickly caught up. Was there something wrong? Why had Lance stopped? “Is everything alright?”

Lance turned and shot him a small smile- nowhere near as big as the ones he had flashed for the others only moments before, but that, Keith understood. They both had appearances they wanted to keep up; things they didn’t want the others to know about, or even guess at- but there were no secrets between them.

“You sure you’re gonna be fine?”

Keith nodded. “No one knows we’re here, Lance,” he reminded him, “and besides, with all the damage to the ship, even if those monsters survived they wouldn’t have any means of tracking us. Or a ship to fly.”

“Wait- they’re dead?”

Keith nodded. “Most likely. The others obviously didn’t stick around to identify anything, they were too worried about getting us into healing pods-“

“But the ship- it’s gone?”

“Small little pieces.”

“Oh. Good.” Lance took a deep breath, seemingly relieved. “That’s good.”

“You don’t remember me telling you before?”

“You did?”

Keith nodded. “Yeah, but it was before you went into the healing pod.”

“Oh.” Lance looked a little ashamed that he hadn’t remembered. Keith took his hand as they started walking towards the hangars.

“So,” Lance said conversationally, “what else- what else should I know?”

Keith took a moment to think, then decided to get it all out there at once. “Pidge knows *everything*,” he said.

There must have been something in his voice, because Lance stopped, not ten feet from where they’d just stopped. “What do you mean, ‘everything’?” he asked.

Keith swallowed thickly. This hadn’t been easy for him to hear the first time, and he was glad that Lance would learn it from him and not Pidge or Shiro.

“Chueli’ii” he spat out her name with venom, the woman who’d been in charge of their... interrogation. The creature who’d been behind the scenes, but had stopped by enough to remind

them that she pulled all the strings. “She recorded everything.”

“Oh.”

“And Pidge-“ he started, but Lance was smart enough to connect the dots.

“Oh. She got her hands on it didn’t she?” Lance asked, although it wasn’t much of a question as he already knew the answer. His voice weak, and there was a dull pain in the back of his eyes. “Did she-?”

Keith nodded “Watch it? Yeah.”

“How much?”

“All of it.” Keith swallowed with difficulty. “On fast forward, or multiple screens, or both- I don’t know how, but-”

“Of course she did.” Lance inhaled deeply to steady himself. “Poor Pidge.”

Keith nodded in agreement. “I’ve been meaning to talk to her about it-“

“But she hasn’t been around much lately has she?” Lance finished.

Keith shook his head. “Always somewhere else,” he agreed.

“How did you find out?”

“She just- kinda, told me. It was quick, while you were in the pod. Said she’d found it, seen it, and wouldn’t give it to Shiro unless we wanted her to.”

“So has anyone else seen it?”

“Not according to Pidge. She says that only Shiro knows it exists.”

“Good.” Lance looked at Keith hesitantly. “We don’t- want him to see it- do we?” He looked to Keith for confirmation.

“No.” Absolutely not. “I don’t care what he says about being our leader. No.” If the little that Hunk and Pidge had told him about Shiro and his unhealthy emotional distance while they’d been gone was even slightly true, (and Shiro’s avoidance of the topic seemed to indicate as much,) then Shiro watching those videos was an awful idea. There were certain things—

That if he saw them—

Keith knew that Shiro fought a constant battle every day to be the man he was. There was so much pain in his year of imprisonment, and as twisted as it was, Shiro reasoned with himself that there were other things that were more important than revenge, things more important than *him*. That the universe was better off if he didn’t risk himself in order to kill a few Galra who’d made his personal life hell.

Keith didn’t know whether Shiro would be able to make that same distinction if he saw their month. Keith was sure that their time had been nothing like what Shiro had endured- but family meant a lot to Shiro- it always had. Keith knew that he’d give everything for them, and Keith couldn’t risk that possibility. The Paladins, the universe, they needed him too much. “If he ever did I- I’m not sure we’d get him back,” Keith finished sadly.

“What can we do? I don’t want anyone watching it- not even Pidge- though I know she’s already seen it-”

“But that footage might hold answers for things that neither of us remember,” Keith finished.

Lance nodded. “Can we put it somewhere that only we can access it?”

Keith tilted his head. “I don’t know. We can ask Pidge though. She’ll know.”

Nodding, Lance continued walking. “We’ll have to talk to her.”

“No matter what; we’ll get through this.”

Lance grimaced. “That’s my line.”

Keith nodded. It wasn’t something that was easy to forget.

Over and over in his mind’s eye, he could see Lance. After every torture session, after every punishment, after every sick game that their captors had played, when Keith could barely focus on his hand in front of his face, Lance had been there.

‘We’ll get through this.

We’ll get through this.

we’ll get through this-‘

No matter what, Lance always seemed to be the one comforting him-

While he did nothing.

They hurt Lance,

and he did nothing,

and he did nothing,

nothing,

nothing

noth-

“Keith-- Keith!”

Lance’s alarmed tone was enough to startle him back into the hallway. He gasped as his lungs demanded more oxygen than he’d been providing, winced at the sting in his chest, and definitely would have collapsed if Lance hadn’t been there to support him- both literally and figuratively.

“Whoa. Breathe,” Lance said softly, pulling Keith’s arm over his shoulder to support him. “Take your time. In and out slow, you can do this.”

Keith had been in this situation before, at the end of a flashback/anxiety attack, and as much as he had difficulty admitting it, dealing with the aftermath was always easier when he wasn’t alone; when there was someone there to remind him about the little things, and help orient him. It was so much better than trying to have his scattered, exhausted brain attempt to organize what mattered

and what didn't right then. He could just listen to Lance, and he knew that things were going to work out.

"Thanks," Keith eventually muttered.

Lance nodded. "I'm gonna call Shiro, delay this flight for a bit so you can rest up."

Keith shook his head.

Lance took a slow breath. "Keith--"

"Lance," Keith pleaded.

"Keith, those take a lot out of you. Are-you sure about this?"

"I'll be okay. Besides, I've found that flying helps me orient myself better than just about anything."

Lance looked at him for a long moment. "Trust you," he smirked, "to feel more oriented in a spaceship with no true north, gravity, or horizon line to help you out, than when you're standing with nice steady artificial gravity and inertial dampeners." Lance bounced up and down with a sly smirk to prove his point.

Keith chuckled dryly. "Yeah, yeah, I'm strange."

"But a good strange." Lance smiled kindly.

They started walking again; Keith's arm stayed draped over Lance's shoulder until Lance dropped him off at Red's hangar.

---

Flying was a breeze. Voltron formed without issue, and with it came only feelings of triumph and purpose. No one pried into anyone else's memories- not after they'd seen the blowback from the headsets yesterday- and Keith was actually finding the ability to check in on Lance with only a thought extremely comforting.

"Check it out!" Pidge exclaimed out as they made their way around some small clusters of rock stuck in the nebula. "I'm getting some strange readings from one of the asteroids- do you see this?"

A stream of data popped up on one of Red's displays in front of Keith, and he would freely admit that he had no clue what any of it meant.

"Pidge?" Shiro asked for clarification.

"It's giving off a reading similar to the nebula, but on a much smaller scale. It's muting all the energy signals that come close to it, so even though we have a visual;" she paused, and Keith caught a glimpse of her gesturing emphatically out of the corner of his eye, "Like, I can see it *right in front of me*, but it still comes across as nothing but a blank spot on our radars."

"And it's made of a substance I've never seen before," Hunk added. "Pidge, do you think this substance could be the same one that gives the nebula it's properties? Tiny particles worn away by time that got caught up in the gasses here?"

“It’s definitely a good theory, but I’d have to analyze it up close to know for sure. If we can find a smaller piece, we can take it back to the castle and run some tests.”

“Why bother?” Keith asked, summoning Voltron’s sword.

“Keith...” came Lance’s worried tone.

“Let’s just cut off a chunk,” He finished. Voltron was already close enough to the rock in question, and he easily took a wide swing at it-

Too late, did he realize the sharp feeling of alarm and concern coming from Red.

Or feel the sheer panic coming from Lance.

As soon as his blade touched the substance, the five Lions exploded apart from Voltron in a white flash of pain.

One minute Keith could *feel* the other Paladins, could *hear* them all in his mind. They were safe, and he knew it.

Then in an instant they were all torn away. The emptiness in his mind and heart with out their presence felt like deep gashes into his heart.

It hurt to *breathe*.

Keith choked on the pain, as his heart *throbbed*.

One wound however, didn’t throb. It burned through his whole essence.

He maintained his composure for a second, maybe two.

Then he screamed.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter Summary

Quiznack

## Chapter Notes

Hallo!

Can i just say- so excited for season 7?? XD

Also- so excited for Shiro. So damn excited, and proud. Also thrilled. :D

Thanks to Dragon\_Stone for the beta, and Maddie and Lauren for helping me riddle things out plot-wise.

All of the Comments and Kudos are - well, to put it plainly- incredible. I am blown away, and so so thankful for all of the feedback. You guys are the best.

---

“KEITH!”

Lance’s cry was deafening. Agonizing. Desperate. “KEITH!”

“Whoa- What- what’s happening?!” Pidge called over the comms as she shook her head, trying to clear the buzzing in her ears, “Shiro, I’ve lost all control of Green. She isn’t responding! ”

“Alright, let’s not panic. Hunk!” Shiro called out, “can you still fly?”

“Ugh- Yeah- yeah! Yellow and I are all good!”

“Shiro?” Lance called tentatively, “Shiro, can you hear me?”

“I read you, Lance, hold on. Okay, Hunk, you and Yellow grab Keith and Red, I’ll grab Lance, and then come back out for Pidge. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah- I can do that.” Hunk muttered. Pidge watched as Yellow gently took the unresponsive Red Lion into its claws, and turned to guide them back to the hangar. She groaned and slapped the

console in annoyance.

Katie could feel Green's frustration. It was as if Green was trapped in her own body- (except in her mind's eye she had unbelievably strong armour, and wiring and mechanical neurons instead of biological ones which was just so cool), but she also got the distinct feeling from Green that this had happened before. Her Lion knew, that as frustrating as it was now, the effects would wear off in a few vargas.

Red Pilot is safe, Green told her, putting the ideas into her head like they'd all gotten used to. Red Lion is frustrated, and paralyzed, like Green and Blue, but unharmed.

The exercise had started off well, until she'd picked up traces of a strange mineral in one of the asteroids they'd been jumping off of. Keith of course, thought he could help by blundering in with his blade- and the impact of the energy jaw blade against the unknown mineral had resulted in an... unfavourable blowback. Red was currently unresponsive, and Keith's comms seemed to be down- but there was nothing, absolutely nothing that would indicate Keith had been harmed at all. She and Lance- of course being closest to him had hit the tail end of the energy wave. Fortunately they'd gotten to keep their comms, even if they couldn't drive.

That was when Lance had started yelling

"Keith! Are you alright? Please, please just answer me, Keith, I need to know you're okay! Shiro? Are you there? C'mmon guys, this isn't funny. Pidge? Hunk? Keith?"

"Lance-" Shiro started, and his voice was softer than she'd heard in a long time. "Lance, can you hear me? I need you to answer me, can you do that?"

"Guys, are- are you there? It's dark- so dark- Why can't I-Blue- Blue won't -move and I-I can't- I can't-"

"Lance!" she called gently. Pidge was pretty sure that the hesitation and hiccups meant he was hyperventilating.

"We're right here Lance, we didn't go anywhere," Shiro said, his tone slow and reassuring

Pidge felt a spike of anxiety for Lance that was only heightened by Green as Blue reached out to the other Lions.

Lance- Oh god.

"Shiro- Green says he can't hear you," Pidge relayed hurriedly as her Lion told her what Blue was thinking. "She also thinks he's passed out."

"Quiznack," Shiro swore. "Alright, we need to get them inside fast- Pidge-" he started to apologize-

"Go," she interrupted, "I'll be fine. Go take care of our boys."

---

Keith had touched the asteroid with Voltron's blade-

There had been complete and utter *agony*-

Then everything had gone black. No screens, no lights, no noise. Nothing. Even the windows were dark, he couldn't see anything, not a speck of light or sign of life.

Lance didn't like nothing. He'd had too much of nothing lately. He wanted noise, and people, and lights and-

Anything but this.

"Keith!" he called, "Keith!" Where was he? What had happened? Was he okay? Lance needed to hear his voice, sense him in his mind, feel his reassuring touch- "Keith!"

No answer. He tried for another voice that he so desperately wanted to hear. "Shiro? Shiro can you hear me?"

Still nothing. He hated it.

Alright, breathe, he told himself. Breathe.

"Keith!" he called again, "are you alright? Please, please just answer me. Keith, I need to know you're okay! Shiro? Are you there? C'mmon guys, this isn't funny. Pidge? Hunk?"

They couldn't hear him, he couldn't hear them; he didn't quite have the brain space to process the finer details. There was so much else clawing at his attention. It was dark, and Keith was probably hurt, and how could he know that he wasn't hurt- what if they were both lying on the floor of that cell still, what if he had imagined it all-

No, he told himself, we got out, we did get out, they got us out and we are home, we are home and we're safe, and I'm just trapped in Blue- and Blue can't move- but she can always move- she's a giant sentient Space Lion, why can't she move, maybe I'm not really-

"Guys, are- are you there?" he tried again, his voice smaller; it was getting really hard to breath. Had the air re-circulators turned off with the rest of the power? Was he running out of oxygen? "It's dark- so dark- Why can't I-Blue- Blue won't move and I-I can't- I can't-"

---

Lance opened his eyes to find himself lying on a couch in the lounge with his head on Keith's lap.

"Wha- Keith?" he asked, his voice groggy.

"Hey," Keith said gently, "you're awake."

"Finally," Pidge complained, vaulting over the couches with ease before handing him a water box. Keith wordlessly accepted it for him, putting it to the side. Pidge frowned, but didn't say anything. "You should have been up ages ago- but apparently you needed the rest so badly that your brain just kinda shut down for a while. Coran did give you something to help with the..." she paused, hesitant to say it, "the occasional nightmare, though."

Lance frowned slightly, then looked up at Keith for clarification. "What happened?"

Keith smiled, and ran his fingers through Lance's hair again. The brunet leant into the touch. "Apparently you really don't do well with dark spaces."

“Oh,” he mumbled, and felt his face grow hot as he tried to turn and bury his head in Keith’s leg. His memories tumbled back in a flood, and he quickly brought a hand up to grab Keith’s arm, to reassure himself that he was really there, and that that this was real. “You- you’re alright?”

Keith nodded “Yeah, I’m fine, Red was offline for a while- so were Green and Blue- but I was never hurt.”

“But- you weren’t saying anything-“

“His comms were down,” Pidge explained. “So were yours- kinda. We could hear you, but you couldn’t hear us.”

“Oh.” There was a slight pause before Lance understood that comment in its entirety. “Ohhhhh.”

They’d heard him panic himself into unconsciousness. That was not exactly something he wanted to have on his social record.

Pidge winced. “Yeah... It didn’t take us long to figure out what was going on, but it was still long enough for you to hyperventilate and pass out.” She grimaced. “Sorry about that.”

Once again, Lance rolled his head over so that he could hide his face. Keith rubbed the back of his shoulder in soothing circles and sighed.

“Lance- they get it. It’s alright.”

It took Lance a minute to gather the courage to look up again, and his eyes were stinging when he turned to see Keith’s face.

Thankfully Pidge had decided she was more needed... elsewhere.

“I hate this,” he mumbled.

He should have realized what was going on, he should have known that the others would look out for him, he shouldn’t have panicked at the first hiccup in their day.

“I know,” Keith whispered. “Me too.”

“I just had such a bad feeling about the whole thing to begin with...”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Do you think this was one of those- self fulfilling prophecy sorta things? The ones where you think something’s gonna happen, and then somehow warp events so that you were right the whole time?”

Keith looked at him seriously, then shrugged. “I know you like being right- but I don’t think you’d ever put any of us in danger just to prove it.”

“No- No I wouldn’t- I never-“

“Lance-“ he stopped him, “this wasn’t your fault. I’m the one who hit the asteroid. This one’s all on me.” Keith’s fingers stilled on his back, and Lance could feel them curl into a fist against his skin. “I’m sorry,” he said, looking away.

Lance pulled himself up and curled his legs beneath him as he leaned into Keith’s side, grabbing the Red Paladin’s head to turn it towards him. “No, Keith. No matter what happened afterwards,

that was the most ‘Impulsive Keith Doesn’t Think First’ thing I’ve seen you do in a while. It was actually nice to see.”

“But you- Lance, I climbed out of Red and you were *unconscious*. I was scared—”

Lance touched his forehead to Keith’s in sympathy. “You didn’t come through it without a scratch either.” Lance frowned, and took Keith’s hand gently in his own. “It was such a ‘You’ moment; and that’s good. It means that Pidge was right about our brains settling back to normal.”

“But I didn’t *think*.”

Lance smiled, “That’s nothing new. You’ve always been a hothead.”

Keith flushed. “I hurt you. I won’t let it happen again.”

“Keith-“ Lance warned. “Don’t make promises like that. We both know they’re impossible to keep in our line of work.”

Keith sighed, and it looked like it pained him that he didn’t have an argument against Lance.

“So, the others know how I reacted...” Lance changed the subject abruptly, his fingers dancing lightly over Keith’s. “Do they know how you handled it?”

Keith took a moment to compose his answer. “They- they don’t want to know.”

Lance turned Keith’s hands over in his own, pulled his gloves off and gingerly touched the newly split skin over his pale knuckles. He felt Keith’s eyes on him, and raised his own to meet them. “Yeah,” he whispered. “Probably not.”

Keith reached over to grab the water box from where he’d put it down beside them. “Drink- Coran says you’re not getting enough fluids.”

Lance groaned, but complied, pulling a large sip. “You want to talk about it?” he asked, nodding at the fresh scabs.

“No.”

Lance nodded.

“I was stupid.”

Lance rolled his eyes, and Keith shook his head.

“No I- I rushed in, and – Look what happened.”

“It was an accident,” Lance consoled. “You didn’t do it on purpose. Could have happened to any of us.”

“But it didn’t happen to anyone else, it happened to me. *I* put you guys through that.”

“A blackout? Just because I’m not good with isolation”, Lance countered, “and the dark, doesn’t mean this is your fault.”

Keith frowned.

“Lance,” he asked self consciously, “didn’t it hurt?”

“Did what hurt?”

“When Voltron was... torn apart?”

Lance thought for a moment. “I didn’t like it,” he started slowly, “not being able to feel everyone through the link anymore. But no, it wasn’t painful.” He lifted his eyes from the gloves Keith had been wearing, ones that Lance knew he hadn’t been wearing when they got into their Lions. “It hurt you though, didn’t it?” he asked gently.

Keith didn’t move for a long moment, then nodded. “I could handle the ache when the others were pulled away. But then- you were gone-” he inhaled sharply, then let out a long breath. “I owe Red an apology. Or two. And... we’re gonna need to do some repairs.” He winced, “m ight need Pidge’s help”

Lance leant his head on Keith’s shoulder, and Keith melted into the contact.

“So what do you want to do now?” Lance asked lightly. “We can watch a movie, or see how far Pidge has gotten in that video game since we’ve been... away.” Lance mused gently. “And there’s that stupid Altean upside down pool... Or- No, wait! I have a better Idea.”

Keith looked at him sceptically.

“Let’s hit the training deck.”

Keith’s eyes widened in surprise. “Wait- what did you say?”

“The training deck,” Lance repeated.

“After- everything that just happened? You should rest-“

“Meh, I’ll take it easy. Besides, you know the phrase, ‘get back on the horse’ and all?”

Keith frowned, “I’m pretty sure this is different.”

Standing, Lance pulled up Keith with him.

“I’m pretty sure I don’t care.”

Keith bit his lip. “Are you sure?”

Lance nodded. “Yeah. I’ll do some target practice, and you can beat the cannoli out of a few gladiators. You look like you need it.”

“Yeah,” Keith admitted, “I kinda do.”

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Summary

As the only person who could possibly understand the burden of leadership that she bore; Shiro was the friend Allura'd always wanted as a child. Someone who would watch her back without feeling obligated by her position to do so. Someone who would treat her as an equal, not expect her to always take the lead; and who by extension wasn't afraid to call her out when she crossed a line. Someone who would respect her not because she was the Princess, but because she'd earned it. Someone who expected her to treat them the same way.

And no one who was more deserving of her respect. After everything that Shiro had been through, he was still strong for the young Paladins in a way that she knew few in the universe would ever be capable of. He consistently presented an unwavering example of an exemplary moral code to those around him. He was kind, and fair, and deserved much better than the lot he had been delivered. Still, she knew that without his time with the Galra, Shiro wouldn't be the person that he was now, and there was no one more capable in helping Keith and Lance with their current predicament than he.

Allura was honoured to have him as one of her closest friends and allies in their fight against tyranny.

## Chapter Notes

The summary for this chapter acts as a prologue of sorts, PLEASE READ SUMMARY BEFORE READING THE CHAPTER!

Thanks to Dragon\_stone for the beta, to Lauren for helping me at least make my science real-ish (as real as you can get in a fictional world,) and Maddie for making me blush with her comments.

A couple of things i want to mention; i wrote most of this before season 3, and filled in gaps myself then that have since been filled in the show. I'll do what i can to use new stuff revealed in cannon, but it's an AU so things will be different.

On the other hand, the new reveal concerning Shiro will absolutely be a thing in this piece, (vague on purpose in case some people have successfully avoided spoilers).

Enjoy guys :)

---

The Lions were running their repair sequences, Hunk was tag teaming with Pidge on a new project of theirs (Pidge had successfully made the argument that they should have a sample of the asteroid in order to discover its properties), and Lance and Keith were... well, Shiro wasn't quite sure where they were right now, but he was certain that they were together, and for now, as long as they were together, they would be fine.

Shiro had put off this discussion long enough; he needed to find Allura. It was about time they started talking about the real issue between them.

"Allura?" He activated his set of inter-castle comms that Pidge had put together. "Are you busy?"

The Princess replied almost instantly. "Not particularly." She sounded almost relieved. "I'm monitoring the system as it logs an inventory of the castle's formal wear. I'm actually of the mind to run everything through the recycler and ask the Paladins for their thoughts on new garments; most of what we have is insufferably impractical for our needs. Not to mention 10,000 years out of style."

He nodded, then stopped awkwardly when he remembered she couldn't see him. "You should talk to Lance about it," he offered.

"Lance- really?"

"Yeah, really. Princess, is there somewhere we can talk?"

"Yes of course. I'll be on the bridge in a few doboshes, will that work?"

"I'll meet you there."

Shiro inhaled deeply, and spun around, going back the way he'd come.

The Princess was sitting on the floor near the windows when Shiro walked in. He only hesitated for a moment before sitting right next to her and the mice.

Together they looked out at the myriad of colours, swirls, and distant stars beyond the grand windows.

The nebula that offered them temporary sanctuary was beautiful, and Shiro realized that he hadn't yet taken time just to enjoy the view

"I am sorry, you know," Allura started, "for keeping the true nature of their condition from you."

The slight worry that Shiro had felt over explaining why he wanted to talk instantly evaporated. He should have realized that she was smarter than that.

"I didn't think it would do any harm to let all of you have a day or two free of worry," Allura continued, her voice hesitant. "It's been so long since any of you have had that."

Shiro nodded. "There are things that you keep to yourself for the good of others, to protect them. I understand that, and it's a part of your job." He started kindly, "I don't think that this was one of those things though."

"What do you mean?"

"There was a look in your eyes when Pidge called you out," Shiro paused. "Allura, it wasn't sadness. If everything you claimed was the truth, then it should have been. But you weren't sad that we would have to bear the burden of yet another stress. You were scared."



Allura looked away, face darkening with embarrassed shame at being called out yet again.

“At first,” Shiro continued, “I thought you were scared of how we would react to you keeping something from us- as any human would be in that situation; and that that was why you waited so long to say something. But you aren’t human, and it all made a little more sense when I realized that I shouldn’t count on your reactions to necessarily have a simple human value to them. I realized that you were scared for another reason.”

This time when she turned to look at him, her eyes were rimmed with red.

“I think that you were scared, because you didn’t know how to fix this. You’re both a born leader; and a groomed leader. You know that bringing people a problem before you have a solution doesn’t always end well.”

There were tears running down her cheeks now.

“Most of all though- you were scared to tell us that this might not end well. I think the only reason that you talked to us when Pidge forced you to, instead of when you wanted to, was because you hadn’t yet figured out how to tell us that we might lose one of our own.”

A sob escaped from Allura’s chest, and she curled slightly in on herself. Chulak climbed up to sit on her shoulder, and nuzzled at her chin.

“Did I miss anything?” Shiro asked softly, as he set a hand gently on her shoulder.

She shook her head.

Shiro gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze as he dropped his hand, but said nothing, allowing her to take as long as she needed.

After a few minutes, she spoke.

“When Coran and I realized what- what exactly it was that they’d been exposed to—‘ she swallowed thickly. “Every Altean knows of it. We call it Arig’uulsk’a. Colloquially in your language it translates to ‘Wraith Berry’- but a more accurate way of putting it,” she shivered, “would be ‘Destroyer of Souls’.”

Shiro inhaled sharply at the term. He’d heard that name before.

“When I was a young,” Allura continued, “there was a cruel but powerful man, an Unilo that discovered the plant’s value as a... a tool of interrogation. He began to cultivate it, refining the toxin, and selling it to whomever would pay the most. It ravaged through the galaxy unchecked much too long, certainly for the majority of my childhood. The worst part was that most of his buyers didn’t understand what the toxin really did to those who were exposed to it. Most of the victims that were being exposed didn’t even know of its existence.”

There was a heavy silence.

“There is a good reason Pidge was scared.” She said eventually. “And I feel I must tell you how *incredibly* lucky we are that Lance and Keith both have human genes. You, as a species, are surprisingly resilient.”

“Not that I’m disagreeing-“ Shiro spoke, his tone hesitant, “but what is it that makes us so special?”

“You must understand, this Wraith Berry changes the way the control centre of any species- the mind, if you will- puts ideas together. The brain takes a long time to learn habits; moral ideals and such, most species call this period the equivalent to your ‘childhood’. During this time individuals, or collectives, compile a collection of meanings and descriptions for each and every event, notion, or ideal that they might come across, and each one differing from the rest, if only slightly. Collectively they create the building blocks for bigger and more complex ideas.”

“Kind of like a dictionary. You know, big book, words with definitions, really the basis of any language...?”

“A Word Descriptor? Yes, much like that. In those years of learning, you figure out what you want those descriptors to be, and where you need those explanations to be. Now what would happen if in one of your evenings, all of those words and descriptions were taken and muddled, then arbitrarily reorganized?”

Shocked silence filled the space between them.

“Chaos, “ Shiro eventually whispered.

Allura nodded. “An absolute lack of order. Some species fared better than others with the after effects of the Arig’uulsk’a. Due to our natural affinity with quintessence, Alteans were among the most susceptible to the fruit, with the Galra not far behind us.”

“Keith-“

“Is part human, thankfully. If he hadn’t been, we would likely be searching for a new Red Paladin right now, and the Keith we know would no longer exist.”

Allura looked at him suddenly, then nodded to herself, as if she had decided to tell him something she’d not previously thought to mention.

“The hardest question individuals are faced with when... a loved one of theirs returns after having been affected, is that of if the individual in question would rather be alive, but not nearly the same person that they were;” Shiro had to strain his ears as Allura’s voice dropped several levels, “or if they would have preferred death,” she finished with a whisper.

He knew what Keith would have wanted; and Shiro was glad that he was already sitting. Taking a breath to steady himself, he pushed on.

“So tell me. How- how are they okay? Hadn’t they been drugged with this, this berry- for almost a month? Why didn’t anything happen before now?” Shiro could hear his own voice weaken, and it scared him.

“These effects,” Allura explained, “come into play as a symptom of what you call ‘withdrawal’. It’s the lack of the toxin derived from Wraith Berry in the body, in combination with the amount of time exposed to it, that results in the disruption of the mind. The ‘chaos’,” she quoted him.

Shiro let out a shaky breath and dropped his head into his hands. “And we forced them into that withdrawal.” He had done this. He hadn’t had all the information, he should have been able to account for something like this, that was his job—

“Shiro, no. You could never have known-“

“But they might not- If I’d just checked-“

“Checked for what? You wouldn’t have known to look for this. Coran and I both thought the plant was long extinct. There is no cure, there was no way around where we are today.”

Shiro’s tired eyes found hers. “Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I wasn’t. In fact,” she continued, her tone a little more hopeful, “in the past, your Human DNA might have been something we would have looked into as a possible source of a vaccination of sorts, maybe even a cure eventually. The human genome might have led to a sort of medical or genetic answer that could have given us the upper hand in order to combat the berries. I suppose it still could,” She gave a small smirk. “Your human brains,” Allura lay a gentle hand on the side of his head, as though to protect the mind housed within, and gave a small smile as she pulled it away seconds later “are incredibly resistant to outside interference.”

Shiro thought about that, and almost smiled before he remembered something Pidge had said- “but Pidge said that it was the Lions that helped Lance and Keith maintain their sense of self, more than anything else-“

“Absolutely the Lions helped,” Shiro thought Allura looked nervous. “But they only knew what to do, because they’ve encountered the berries before.”

That, Shiro had not been expecting. “It- what?”

Allura looked away. “A Paladin was captured once, subjected to the berries, and never recovered. When my father finally retrieved her-” she bit her lip. “She was nearly unrecognizable.”

“I’m sorry, Allura.”

Dipping her head appreciatively, she spoke. “Thank you. It was a- painful day in the history of the Paladins, in the history of Altea, but that’s all long in the past now.”

“Not for you,” Shiro interrupted her.

She stopped, startled, and then looked at him with a new respect in her eyes.

“You are very- astute at times,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Shiro shrugged.

“You are right of course. To me it feels- much closer, as though little time has passed. Today though- now, all I can think about is how incredibly thankful I am. How lucky we are that both the Red and Blue Paladins were able to retain their quintessences.” She pet one of the mice, and protectively brought it close to her chest. “Shiro, I couldn’t bear to see anyone but them in their Lions.”

He nodded. “Yeah. I know how you feel.”

They looked out at the stars again, the silence welcome as they both thought over the events of the past few of days.

Shiro was going over his plans for the next day- a definite sleep-in was high up on his list of priorities for the whole team; when Allura interrupted his thoughts.

“I do trust you,” she blurted out suddenly.

“Hmm?” Shiro turned to her for clarification.

“At the beginning of the week, you said that you thought that I didn’t trust you. I do. But I wasn’t lying when I said you’ve been having a hard time lately.”

He frowned. There was nothing he could do about it now, but he wished that his past self had taken some care to keep his personal issues under wraps.

“Shiro.” She reached out and put a hand on his shoulder, as if she knew what he was thinking. “It’s alright. When they were missing- none of us were in a good headspace. I just wanted to remind you that my offer still stands. My offer will always stand.”

Every day they’d been missing Lance and Keith- every day that he’d kept to himself- Allura had come and found him. She’d taken the time to sit down, and told him how the ship was doing. She’d updated him on where they were heading, she’d briefed him with any new information the castle had received on Keith and Lance’s potential whereabouts. She’d talked to him, and let him know each time that if he ever wanted to talk, she’d be there.

He placed his human hand on hers. “Thank you, Allura.”

It meant a lot to him that she would even offer. That she was still willing to listen after everything that had happened. Maybe even, in time, he would take her up on it.

Not now-

but maybe.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Summary

A little Lance and Blue time.

## Chapter Notes

Halla :D

Thanks to Dragon\_Stone as always for being my beautiful editor, and to everyone in my life for putting up with my grumpy, exhausted, existence all summer :D

OMG season 7. I am beyond blown away. Brilliantly done.

Also- here's to you guys for sticking with me this far. I thought I'd let you know that I've been spending what little free time I have to work on part three! No timeline yet; but it is now an entity rather than a pile of notes :D

Thanks for the brilliant and inspiring comments- Love you all so much!

(Psychosei- lemme know thoughts!)

---

Lance sat in the corner of the training deck on a pile of mats, having long ago given up on his target practice. He had more pressing things to think about, even more pressing than proving to Keith that he could still best him (which he totally could).

He sunk into a meditative stance- just like his sister had taught him years go, and mentally reached out for Blue. (Yes, alright- he didn't *actually* need to be meditating to talk to Blue- but this way the others knew better than to disturb him).

Blue's consciousness settled easily around his own with a fond protectiveness. A sense of comfort and safety soothed him, a feeling that was impossible to accurately describe to anyone who wasn't a Paladin. He'd tried- in one of the many letters that he wrote home but could never send- and had eventually just said: 'it's like getting a million of mama's hugs all at once, but better. (Sorry mama.)'

A wave of concern for his safety flowed from his Blue guardian.

*I'm sorry, Beautiful, Lance apologized, I'm fine now; really.*

She was worried, and a little hurt. Why hadn't he reached out for her when his visual world went

dark? Why hadn't he trusted her? Didn't he believe that she'd keep him safe?

Then he could feel her anger, boy was she was angry- but not at him; never at him. She was angry at those who had taken him from her. Those who had taught him- even slightly- that she wouldn't be there for him when he needed her. She would always be there, she promised him now. She wouldn't let anything stop her.

Lance inhaled, and eagerly took in all the love and reassurance she was sending. He couldn't help but believe her, especially when they were close like this.

He also knew that later would be a different story.

There would be a split second when he had trouble even *wanting* to reach out for his Lion, and it would hurt to remember all the times that she hadn't reached back; when he'd searched and searched the darkness where she lived in the back of his mind, only to find it so empty and cold that he'd started to question if she was even out there at all.

Later would be a different story.

*Blue- I love you, you know that?*

He felt a return of the affection, magnified.

*But- why did it take you guys so long? he asked nervously. You and Red- Keith and I, we both thought our connections with you guys were the strongest. The best. What happened?*

She felt pain, regret, and then pride for a moment because the Red Paladin hadn't thought to ask this, but her Paladin had.

At first, she told him, it had felt as though his mind was asleep. Nothing more, than harmless sleep. Then, she'd realized that he'd been 'asleep' for far too long- and tried to investigate. Something *wrong* had gotten in the way. Blue had seen it in her mind as a fearsome waterfall that pounded, separating her from her Paladin with an endless stream of hostile water. She showed then him how Red had interpreted the same phenomenon as a solid wall of flames between her and Keith. Between the two Lions, they'd realized that this was something more than one of their Paladins simply wanting a private moment; something was *wrong*. It was then that they'd alerted the other Lions.

Lance couldn't help it- he was curious and indicated as much. Thinking on it later, Lance couldn't figure out if it had been a conscious decision or a subconscious decision to ask; often those lines were one and the same when it came to their psychic link with the lions. There was some deep dark part inside of him that wanted to know how the others had reacted.

If they'd even cared, what they'd done, who'd done what-

In her own way, Blue's subsequent contribution to their conversation was nothing more than her desire to show Lance that they *did* care.

A lot.

So she showed him everything. The whole situation played out in front of his eyes and in his mind as though he were a part of it. He could feel what she had felt. He could understand the other Lions in ways he'd never thought he would. He could even sense himself as she had- like a distant memory that you didn't want to forget, but could feel fading away regardless.

---

-From Blue's Den aboard the Castle-

*Paladin- her Paladin-*

*He'd been quiet for so long-*

*Too long?*

*Her curiosity rippled outwards and right back to her, completely unchanged.*

*Odd.*

*Wrong.*

*The Paladins were mostly enjoying themselves on the planet, (albeit with many tendrils of annoyance towards the local population,) she could feel them through the other Lions.*

*She just couldn't feel hers.*

*Neither could Red, she noticed.*

*No-*

*That's-*

*Something was wrong*

*In an instant Red picked up on her concern, and together they investigated, probing their individual psychic connections.*

*Their alarm spiked suddenly, simultaneously.*

*Something was very, very wrong.*

*Yellow, Green, and Black couldn't help but notice their distress; it was in their nature.*

*Protecting the pride was paramount.*

*Blue couldn't tell where her Paladin was, but immediately she realized he wasn't here. He wasn't here anymore, and she hadn't noticed his leaving, and guilt flooded through her powerful being.*

*She tilted her head back and roared, angry at her lack of power trapped on the Castle, heartbroken with the realization that she couldn't feel Lance. For once the others didn't stop her; this was one of their **own**. A part of them was numb with the pain of loss as well.*

*Red joined her in a melancholic roar that shook the rivets.*

*Lance was missing. So was Keith. Only the faintest of hints on the edges of their quintessence was there to remind the Lions that their Paladins still existed.*

*That they were still alive.*

*The Princess' earlier request to stay out of sight was forgotten in an instant. Each of the Lions raced down to the surface in a need to **act**.*

*As Blue lowered herself to the ground, she saw Yellow and Green take it upon themselves to snarl at any unwelcome locals. She and Red didn't have the processing power to deal with such inconsequential beings, not when the biggest entities in their worlds had vanished.*

*Blue watched, restless, as the Black Paladin approached, and peripherally noticed the concern in his gaze. Black started to communicate with him, to tell him-*

*The Black Paladin crumpled to the ground in shock.*

*Not moving*

*Not moving*

*Still not moving-*

*Wrong.*

*Black whimpered; Hunk, Katie-Pidge, and the Princess rushed forwards to see to Shiro, tending to their wounded. The Yellow Paladin gathers the Black in his arms. A hug, Blue's Paladin would call it.*

*The Princess started to coordinate a search. Blue watched as they spoke briefly and then split up-to the caves to check for any hints of their Paladin's whereabouts, to the people to ask for help, to the castle to check the sensors.*

*Blue watched. She watched as each of the Paladins joined with their Lions, and she felt their acute despair mirror her own. She felt their worry and their panic, and their depression and their need and their longing.*

*She felt it all.*

*She was alone in a way that she'd never been before, not even in the thousands of years on earth. Then, she had been waiting.*

*Now she'd been robbed of her soul. It hurt, and it was **wrong**.*

*She needed him.*

*The loneliness felt so, so, **wrong**.*

*So as Lance sat on the training deck, and she in her Den; Blue showed him how much his absence had **hurt**.*

---

Keith nearly missed the next jab from the Gladiator as a soft cry echoed through the room.

“Lance?”



He parried the next blow, then swung outward, catching the robot hard enough against the chest to cause it to stumble back and give him a moment's reprieve. Lance was sitting in the corner of the room. At first glance it simply looked as though he were talking to Blue-

Lance started to shake- yet another muted cry escaped his lips, and Keith's heartbeat instantly sped up.

Shit, shit, shit. The last thing Lance needed was *another* nightmare.

He dropped his weapon and rushed towards him. "Lance!" He screamed. The gladiator took another swing and Keith barely managed to spit out 'End Training Sequence' around his cries of Lance's name. "Lance! Wake up!"

This was his fault. He hadn't been paying enough attention. he should never have let Lance fall asleep alone- The closer he drew, the more he could see the shiny tears down Lance's face. He dropped to his knees on the mats next to the Blue Paladin.

"Lance!" he urged again. Not wanting to startle the Blue Paladin and make the situation worse, he simply grabbed Lance's hand in his own, giving him something to anchor himself with, like they had both done for each other many times in the cell. "Lance- Please," he begged, "you need to wake up."

Lance shuddered softly, then opened his eyes, tears freely falling."Keith?" he asked, his voice rough, but clearly surprised to find him there.

"Yeah. I'm here, and I'm real." Keith tightened his fingers around Lance's. "Lance- I'm sorry, I should have kept a better eye out, you shouldn't have fallen asleep alone--"

Lance shook his head. "No- I- I wasn't asleep."

Keith exhaled in relief. "It looked like- it looked like you were having a nightmare." Keith shuddered, "and after today-" he grimaced.

"Oh?" Lance glanced up, then brought his hand to his face, and looked at his fingers in surprise when they came away wet. "Oh. Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

Keith was entirely confused. "So... not a nightmare?"

"No- well. Maybe. But it wasn't my nightmare. If anything, I think it was Blue's. We were conversing- and then she let slip how it was she and Red that had- alerted the others... and I wondered what their reactions were..." He bit his lip guiltily, and Keith's heart lightened.

Okay. So as hard as whatever Blue had shown him had probably been for him to see- the tears were a by-product. They weren't *his*, essentially. That was a relief. Keith didn't like that Blue was hurting, but at least Lance *wasn't*.

"Sorry," Lance said, his voice small. "I- We didn't mean to worry you."

Keith shot him a half smile. "It's alright. It's not your fault. Besides, I was done with training anyways."

"You sure?"

Keith nodded. "Yeah.

Lance nodded in return. “Okay then.”

He held Keith’s hand firmly in his own, and wrinkled his nose. “Showers before dinner?” he suggested.

Keith rolled his eyes at Lance’s lack of tact, but nodded.

Not even half an hour later Hunk sent out the 20 dobosh warning for dinner at nearly the same time as Keith stepped out of the bathroom to find Lance curled up on the bed, *actually* sleeping this time around. Keith decided to call it a night for the both of them.

“Shiro?” Keith tapped at his comms.

“Keith?” Shiro replied almost immediately, “is everything alright?”

“Yeah, we’re doing better.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“We’re, uh, gonna pass on dinner though, okay?”

“Okaaay.” Shiro’s response was slow, and Keith knew that tone.

“I’m not that hungry,” he explained, “and Lance is kinda... already asleep.”

Keith could hear Shiro’s smile though his words. “Alright. I’ll have Hunk put some aside in case you get hungry later.”

“That sounds good. Thanks, Shiro.”

“Of course. You guys try to get some sleep.”

“We will.”

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Summary

Lance and Keith sleep in, and Shiro tries his best to comfort them given all of the recent events.

## Chapter Notes

Hai!

A chapter for the Holiday Break!

Thanks for sticking with me this far - enjoy this little spoonful of angst!

Happy New Year!

XD

That night, Keith and Lance didn't waste a few hours trying to sleep at the same time. Instead, they quickly fell into habits that they'd developed during their captivity; they took turns watching and calming while the other slept. When one woke from a nightmare, they switched places.

When breakfast came and went without sight of either Lance or Keith -and the dinner that Hunk had left out was untouched- Shiro decided it was more than past time he checked in on them.

Knocking slightly before he opened the door in case anyone was awake, Shiro walked in with two bowls of goo. He found a sleeping Keith and a disheveled Lance propped up against the wall, gazing at the stars and swirls of the nebula through their new 'window'. Pidge had thought it would help with Lance's claustrophobia, and Allura had been all too happy to help her find a spare view panel which the Green Paladin had quickly linked to a feed from the observation deck.

"Hey," Shiro said softly.

Lance inhaled and exhaled slowly as he turned to look at Shiro, then nodded. "Hi Shiro. Sorry- are we late?" He looked as though he meant to get up, but had decided against it for the sake of not disturbing Keith.

Shiro gently shook his head, and his words were kind. "Don't worry about it." He pulled a chair over and sat down next to them as he did a cursory evaluation. Lance was awake, but black circles rimmed his eyes and Shiro wouldn't be surprised if he'd only gotten about three hours of sleep. The effects of the Pod and its forced rest were already wearing off- probably a direct effect of the day before and all of its events.

Guilt stabbed at Shiro's gut- that was his fault. If he hadn't pushed so hard-

Keith looked slightly better- although if he had to guess why, it was because Lance was currently

ensuring that he got uninterrupted rest. As he took in their weary forms Shiro couldn't help himself, his gaze lingered on their clasped hands. What they had gone through...

Lance followed his glance, and bit his lip. "It's easier," he explained.

Shiro nodded. "Pidge said something-" he started, but didn't bother finishing when Lance started to agree.

"Yeah. It- it helps."

Pidge had told Shiro that the only human contact either of them had had during their time as prisoners was when they could grasp each other's hand across the cell they'd shared. It made sense that that contact would come to mean so much to them.

"Lance, I want you to know, I'm sorry." Shiro passed him a bowl of food, and left the other on the bedside table.

Lance put the bowl on his lap. "What for, Shiro?"

"You guys needed this yesterday."

"A sleep-in?"

"Yeah. A day to just rest and, well, reacquaint yourselves with personal autonomy."

Lance shrugged "No, Shiro, that's not on you. We really wanted to get back into old routines. We were hungry for it. You know us. I'm not sure we would have settled for anything less."

"We still shouldn't have flown."

"Maybe," Lance allowed, "but it wasn't as if you forced us. We both wanted to be out there. Besides, with everything Pidge said about our brains- I'm not sure it will make much difference in the long run."

Shiro sat silently for a long moment finding his words, remembering the absolute terror in Lance's voice when Blue had lost power, when he thought he'd been completely alone, "There is no way that you- " he said, "being that scared-" Shiro took a shaky breath, "*helped.*"

The Blue Paladin looked away, his face reddening with shame.

"Lance-" Shiro hurried to reassure him, "you know that we would never abandon you- right?"

Lance flushed, but nodded. "Yeah... sorry about that."

"Don't apologize. It's our job to make sure you know these things. I'll tell you as often as you need me to."

Lance looked over nervously. "That's kinda what Blue said."

"Oh?" Shiro was curious.

"Yeah, I talked with Blue yesterday. She- well, she showed me what happened when you guys found out that we had been taken. She was trying to show me how much you guys care- in her own way."

Oh Lance. Shiro's heart went out to him. That couldn't have been fun to watch.

“I know you guys care, Shiro, I do. Every time we form Voltron I can feel it-, it’s just-

“Hard to remember.” Shiro finished for him.

Lance nodded. “Yeah. I have to keep reminding myself that this is all real. That you came for us as *soon* as you could. That we’re safe.”

“You *are* safe”, Shiro reminded him, his tone gentle.

“I know. Right now, I know that.”

It took him only a second, to come to the heartbreaking conclusion. “But not always?” he asked sadly.

Lance looked up at him with the most desperate eyes. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, “I’m so sorry, Shiro-”

He was—was he apologizing? For what?

No.

Shiro stood, perched on the side of the bed, and reached over to grab Lance’s free hand. Lance shifted backwards- just slightly, and Shiro froze, abruptly halting his motion to give Lance the space he needed. “Stop apologizing Lance, please. It’s not your fault, you have absolutely nothing to be sorry for.”

The strength of Lance’s gaze didn’t diminish. After a moment though, he reached forwards and grabbed Shiro’s hand with a death-like grip.

“Say it with me: It’s not your fault.”

Silence.

“Lance?” Shiro prompted.

Lance ducked his head.

“Please. Lance?”

Slowly, dark blue eyes filled with false shame rose up to meet Shiro’s.

“It’s... not my fault?” Lance’s voice was small and uncertain.

As strained as it was, it helped Shiro to hear him try. “That’s right. It’s not your fault.”

“Some of it is my fault.”

“No, Lance-“

“It’s my fault we were captured.”

“Lance-“

“More than that, it’s my fault Keith was captured. I shouldn’t have let him come with me, I should have insisted he stay at the event- I should have said something to annoy him so that he left. Then he would have been safe, and —“

“Lance.” Shiro’s voice faltered. “Please, stop that-”

“I was just so excited, you know? I was just so happy for another chance to prove to Keith that I was meant to be here. That I could be a Paladin too.”

Oh Lance. How would he fix this? Shiro wasn’t sure what to say, but he knew where to start. He shuffled lithely over Keith’s legs to lean against the ‘window’ next to Lance, and after giving Lance a moment to register what he was doing and a chance to pull away if he needed, he wrapped his arms around Lance, pulling him in close.

Lance instantly buried his face in Shiro’s shoulder, reaching the arm that Shiro had just released tight around the Black Paladin’s waist.

“You are a Paladin, Lance,” Shiro whispered, pressing his cheek gently against the top of Lance’s head. The smaller boy’s whole frame shuddered. “You are a Paladin, and you don’t need to prove yourself to anyone, least of all one of us. Alright?”

Lance nodded.

Shiro froze. “Lance, please don’t just nod so I’ll stop talking.”

Lance shook his head. “Promise,” he mumbled.

“You’re the bravest of us all, Lance,” he whispered.

After a few minutes Lance turned his head so he could lean it on Shiro’s shoulder- rather than into it. Shiro hesitantly let go of Lance’s shoulders so that The Blue Paladin could move if he wanted. Lance did just that, rearranging himself comfortably against Shiro’s side, and never once letting go of Keith’s hand.

Neither of them said anything about the wet spots on Shiro’s shirt.

“It won’t always be like this- will it?”

“Like what, Kiddo?” Shiro asked, pulling Lance back into a half-hug once he was settled.

“I dunno,” Lance shrugged. “The past few days... it’s just been a lot.”

“Some days are better than others.” Shiro told him honestly. “Some days you feel just like before. Others you want to lock yourself away. You’ve just got to take it one day at a time.”

Lance nodded. “That’s what you do?”

Shiro nodded slowly.

This was not the sort of advice he wanted to have to share with his teammates- his charges.

He wanted to talk to them about hairpin turns, or dating, or practical jokes, or the proper etiquette when greeting a foreign dignitary. He didn’t want to have to tell them about coping mechanisms or PTSD. They were just kids. This wasn’t fair.

“We’re not doing anything today,” he said instead. “You two take as much time as you need.”

He felt a vague nod on his shoulder.

“Can you-” Lance started hesitantly, then stopped, and shook his head.

“Anything, Lance. What do you need?”

“Can- can you stay for a while?”

“Of course, kiddo. Get some sleep. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Thanks, Shiro,” Lance mumbled.

Instantly the tension left Lance’s form, and finally feeling safe enough to let go of his stranglehold on consciousness, Lance was out in less than a minute.

The Black Paladin sighed and closed his eyes, dipping his temple to Lance’s mop of loose curls.

A tear slid down Shiro’s cheek.

---

It was so dark. Forms and outlines and shapes moved in the shadows all around him; Keith shuddered away from them-

The voice whispered, echoing deep within his heart, deep within his soul. He clawed at his chest, trying to get at it, to get it out, to make it go away- he knew better this time, he wouldn’t listen to it, he had to— Instantly his hands were bound behind him, and he couldn’t do anything- anything, the voice was there and whispering and

His head sprung up as he heard his name and Lance hadn’t been there a moment ago but now he was and he was being dragged away and he was screaming and begging Keith to help and Keith couldn’t do anything, he couldn’t reach Lance, and he couldn’t breathe, the more he pulled against the chains around his arms the tighter they got and the more Lance screamed—

Keith’s eyes shot wide open and he and gasped at lungs that could suddenly work again, and the lights were dim but they were *there* and there were hands on his shoulders, and someone else was holding his hand, and one of those things was okay but the other was *not* and

he hissed and swiped and shook his head and pulled away and hissed again as his head hit something and suddenly there was a voice and

it had been talking the whole time but suddenly he could *hear* it, he could listen, and-

“Keith,”

He knew that voice.

“Keith, it’s alright.”

That voice didn’t belong in the darkness.

“Breathe. In and out, you can do it.”

What was it doing here?

“it was just a nightmare, Keith, it was just a nightmare. You’re fine. You’re fine and Lance is right here and he’s fine too. You’re both back in the castle, and you’re home, and you’re safe, Keith.

You're both safe."

He froze.

It took him a long moment to locate the source of the voice, breathing heavily nearby.

"Shiro?" he asked desperately.

"Yeah. It's me."

He shuddered as he inhaled, and looked around nervously. Lance was beside him, safe, asleep somehow, still holding his hand, and things started to make sense again.

"s really you?"

"Yes, its me. It's Shiro,- *Takashi*. Just breathe, Keith."

*Takashi*. His delusions, the illusions, they had never used that name. He collapsed from his strangled half sitting position with that revelation, limbs quickly loosing the vicious adrenaline that had fuelled them. Shiro's hand moved swiftly from Keith's shoulder to the back of his head, stopping him from hitting the wall again, and he carefully guided Keith's form back down to curl up on the bed.

"Okay," he mumbled.

"Just breathe."

Keith nodded, and took a few minutes to let his pulse slow to a resting heartbeat.

When his heart finally stopped pounding in his ears, he turned and looked up at Shiro with a tired curiosity. The Black Paladin sat cross legged against the head of the bed with a tablet. Lance was sleeping soundly, using Shiro's leg as a pillow.

"Thanks," he said softly, and Shiro shook his head slightly. He might not think that Keith should be thanking him, he'd told him as much every chance he got, but Keith felt obliged regardless.

"What time is it?" he asked groggily.

"About eleven AM," Shiro supplied slowly. Keith's gaze sharpened in surprise. That was pretty late by castle standards, usually they would all be caught up in various activities by now.

"I need to-" he went to sit up, but Shiro put a gentle hand on his legs, stopping him before his action could really get past the 'thought' stage.

"Keith, don't worry about it. Allura and I both agreed that you need to rest."

"Oh." He tried to disguise his relieved sigh- although Keith was sure he'd been unsuccessful. "So, what're you doing here?"

"Making sure you two get some sleep."

Keith frowned. Shiro had better things to do than babysit them;

"There's gotta be something more useful-"

"Nope."



“But-“

“Besides,” Shiro interrupted softly, “Lance asked if I would stay.”

“Oh.” Why hadn’t he said so to begin with? “Ok,” he allowed.

Shiro’s brow furrowed. “Are you hungry?”

Keith thought about it, then nodded. “A little.”

Shiro gestured towards the spork and bowl of food goo resting on the table beside Keith, “I brought that up a few hours ago. It’s goo, so it should still taste like goo.” He smiled, “If you’re interested, that is.”

Keith shrugged. Why not? He purposefully dragged himself into a sitting position, (Shiro let him this time,) and pulled the bowl of food into his lap with one hand.

Taking a bite, he winced, but ultimately Shiro was right. The texture was a bit... chewier than usual, but it tasted the same. As he ignored the texture and kept eating, he found he was thankful for the achingly familiar bland taste. At least it didn’t make his whole mouth go numb like whatever they’d fed them in that cell.

(To think that they’d been gracious for that numbness, simply because it meant they were able to eat.)

“I never thought I’d miss this stuff,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, prison rations don’t quite cut it, do they?” Shiro agreed with a wry twist to his lips.

Keith shook his head in agreement.

Shiro let him eat in silence. Keith put down the bowl when he was only half finished, not hungry enough for any more than that given the queasy nature of his stomach after that nightmare.

Shiro frowned, but didn’t comment. They continued sitting in silence for a while, both comfortable with their own thoughts for the time being. Shiro read from his tablet; and Keith alternated between gazing down at Lance, and staring out of the window at white specks of stars and worlds in a never ending puddle of darkness.

Eventually Shiro turned to him, forever in the role of a concerned older brother. “Are they all that bad?” he asked, putting the tablet to the side. “The nightmares?”

Keith shrugged. “Mine are all about the same. Lance’s are worse.”

Shiro bit his lip. “I think he would say the same about yours.”

Keith grimaced. “Probably. He’s wrong though.”

“What makes you say that?”

“His-” he grimaced, “his nightmares have gotten worse in the past few days.” Keith paused, but as he continued, his eyes never left Lance’s sleeping form. “He tries to hide it, even from me, but its hard not to notice. Mine seem to have- lessened.”

Shiro inhaled in shock. “That one was better than the- the others?”

Keith shook his head. "No, not better. But they've been happening... less often.

Shiro nodded slowly.

"Do you want to--"

"No." Keith interrupted. No, he did not want to talk about it. With Lance, it was different. He'd *been* there. He knew. Shiro had his own horrors to deal with, he didn't need his- theirs- as well.

Shiro nodded sullenly, and guilt flashed through Keith as he replayed the last few seconds in his head, listening to how it sounded. Shiro was just trying to help, and here he was yelling at him-

"I'm sorry--"

"Keith, don't. You have nothing to apologize for. Neither of you do, you've both got to stop thinking that you've done something wrong. Believe me, you haven't."

"Shiro--" They'd talked about this when Lance was unable to use the healing pod. Shiro knew how he felt about the whole situation. It had definitely been his fault.

Shiro shook his head. "If it's anyone's fault it's mine. I let the two of you go off alone."

"We're Paladins. We're supposed to be able to take care of ourselves," Keith muttered, "there was no way you could know that we wouldn't be able to."

Shiro pursed his lips, then reached out and placed a supportive hand on Keith's shoulder. "Will you- tell me? What happened in the caves?"

Keith grimaced, but he'd known that they would come to this eventually. Pidge had gotten ahold of that video feed, and if they were absolutely desperate for information it was certainly more reliable than their memories from the time when they were captured. There was absolutely nothing that could speak for them when it came to their capture though. No video footage. That story, they'd have to tell for themselves.

He nodded. "Yeah." Keith inhaled deeply. "Just- Gimme a minute?" he asked.

A minute to prepare himself.

When they'd been in that cell, Keith had taken many (read: almost all) of his few lucid moments to go over it again and again in his mind, trying to figure out where exactly he had gone wrong. He might have a clear sequence of events in his head, but that didn't make describing it out loud any easier.

"If you're not ready--"

"No, I can do this. I- I can only tell you so much though. Lance might remember more- but--" he bit his lip, trying to figure out the best way to phrase it, and combed a gentle hand through Lance's hair. "But he doesn't like remembering it," he finally settled on. It was a silent plea to Shiro; that if he could make do with what Keith was about to tell him, that he wouldn't ask Lance for more.

Shiro nodded. He understood.

Keith inhaled deeply, and begun to tell the story of their capture.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter Summary

Keith lets Shiro in on some details of their kidnapping, and other fun stuff.

## Chapter Notes

Hello!

Thanks for the comments, they really do motivate me to write more :D Also they make my day, and thats never a bad thing XD

Thanks to Dragon\_Stone for the Beta, and to you guys for sticking with me.

Almost done!

(Is that a good thing or a bad thing? If you have theories or things you might like to see in future parts let me know! There's always a chance i'll Use it, or that I've got something similar in the works! Worst comes to worst, you'll motivate me to work on this series instead of another!)

~M XD

As for this chapter, you might see some not so subtle references to one of my favourite SciFi shows ever- Stargate. Kudos to you if spot them!

---

“So, you know how it started, you were there...” Keith began...

---

The ‘Celebration’ put on for them by the Furlings had been... well, boring. Boring to the tune of Pidge falling asleep during a discussion on the Furling’s tech. So boring that Allura, diplomat to the core, was ready to say forget it and abandon the alliance rather than tear every strand of hair out.

As happy as these people were to have been saved, their species had, quite literally, no sense of humour at all. No sarcasm, no quips, nothing to lighten the mood. The whole team found it a bit difficult to socialize.

“So, Shiro-”

Lance slid up to where their leader was enduring a lecture on the long history of the illegality of prosthetics in the Furling’s culture; not that Shiro could be persecuted of course, after all he wasn’t a citizen. The red, rabbit-like koala still felt it absolutely essential that he know why everyone was avoiding the heroic Black Paladin. Shiro was at the end of his rope

“Lance,” Shiro turned to him in relief. “How can I help?”

Lance shot him a smile of sympathy. “Well, I was talking to one of the furies- I mean Furlings,” Shiro stifled a laugh as Lance smirked, “And they were telling me about a network of caves not too far from here. There are rumours of hauntings, and as a Paladin, I believe it’s my responsibility to check it out. To make sure the population is safe. You understand...”

Shiro nodded, carefully schooling his face into a worried expression. “Of course. That’s only reasonable... But, I can’t let you go alone-“

“I have not yet finished my detailing of the possible transgressions that contain the use of prosthetics, let alone specific incidents. The Blue Paladin must find someone else to accompany him.”

Shiro stared at the Furling in front of him in shock, then inhaled deeply. Allura had warned The Paladins to control themselves- although Shiro suspected that it had been more aimed at Keith or Pidge than anyone else, Shiro also understood that he had to set an example for the younger Paladins.

“Of course.” He smiled stiffly and turned back to Lance. The Blue Paladin looked like he wanted to put a fourth eye in the middle of the Furling’s other three. Shiro shook his head subtly, and Lance frowned.

“I’ll go.” Keith spoke up from the shadows nearby. He’d expertly avoided all conversation with the locals so far, but in his stealthy wandering of the crowd, he had overheard something about a fabled Luxite mine in the same direction. He wouldn’t mind checking it out.

Shiro nodded, sighing with relief. “That’s a good idea. I’ll feel better knowing the two of you have some extra hardware.”

Lance and Keith both smiled. The Furlings, in all their grand wisdom, had insisted that the Paladins not wear their armour, or even bring their Bayards- They were convinced that the Altean built weaponry and armour emitted a certain wavelength of energy that could actually hurt them. Pidge had insisted she could protect them from it, but the Furlings had blatantly refused. Instead, as a compromise, she’d quickly rigged up old fashioned Earth earpieces for the Paladins to wear. Shiro had his arm and Keith had his Blade, but other than that, they were defenceless. The Furlings had even insisted that the Lions only enter the atmosphere if there was a verifiable threat; they had sent their own shuttle up to gather the castle’s inhabitants. It had been a hard sell, but ultimately the Paladins knew that they couldn’t put the population at risk if there was another option (Even if they had fought to save the Furlings in those very lions.)

∞

“So, we made it to the caves without any trouble, “ Keith told Shiro. “They were exactly where the locals had said they would be. We did a quick survey of the area and went in- I was so glad that Pidge had let me borrow that prototype Omnitool from her bench- it meant we had a flashlight of sorts...”

---

The caves had been long and dark, but well cleared and obviously well travelled. Keith pulled out the floating sphere he'd snatched from Pidge, twisted it until a bright light shone from one side, then tossed it back up in the air where it floated in front of them, illuminating the way.

"Nice," Lance nodded approvingly.

Keith shrugged. "Thank Pidge."

"I will."

"Let's go find some ghosts?"

Keith nodded. "Ha. Ghosts. Right."

"I'll have you know," Lance smirked, "that they could totally exist."

"Could, yeah. Definitely. But not here."

"I dunno, man, it feels weird in here. Way too... still. You know? Could be ghosts!"

---

"It took us too long to realize, but I think that was when we first stopped being able to feel Red and Blue." Keith shivered, and for a moment his eyes lost focus, and Shiro knew that Red was lending him all the comfort she could. Keith was back a moment later, not shaking nearly as hard.

"So the Caves were blocking their signals?" Shiro asked hesitantly.

Keith shrugged. "That's what I thought at first, but I'm still not one-hundred percent sure. It makes sense though, and it explains why they attacked us in there, instead of out in the open where they had the advantage of space..."

---

"Lance, get down!" Keith shouted suddenly, and energy blasts filled the cave network behind them. Rather than absorbing the beams from the energy weapons, the stone walls acted more like mirrors, reflecting the blasts back. They continued to bounce around until they either hit the dirt floor, or one of the Paladins, and they *stung*.

"Ow- ow- oww-," Lance hissed, turning his arm to look at the green welt.

“I said down!” Keith roared as yet another volley of shots came down the tunnel towards them. “Shiro- Allura-“ he yelled into his comms as he reached out to drag Lance behind him, extending his Marmoran dagger into a sword out in front of them. “Guys, we could use some help!”

Lance scouted down through the cave network behind them, trying to find another way out now that the one they’d taken was blocked by Big, Hairy, and Armed. Judging by their shiny blue and grey colouring, they weren’t locals either.

“Keith! This way!” Lance called out, and Keith ducked to run and cover in a small side passage that Lance had found.

“Shiro?” Keith tried on the comms again. “Pidge? Hunk? Anyone?” He looked hopelessly at Lance.

The Blue Paladin shook his head. “They’re not answering me either, the caves must be blocking the signal.”

Keith cursed under his breath. Of course they were.

---

“We lasted about five minutes.” Keith’s voice was soft. “I don’t remember what happened after that, my memory just kinda jumps from fighting in the caves to waking up in their cell- Lance said I took a hit for him though.” He shrugged. “Seems as likely as anything.”

“Keith-“ Shiro wasn’t quite sure what to say.

“Please don’t.”

Shiro nodded. Sometimes words couldn’t do anything, he understood that as well as the next ex-prisoner; as well as Keith did, and that broke his heart.

“Shiro?” A voice came through over the comms.

“Yes?” He answered smoothly, turning his shoulders slightly away out of habit, and watched fondly as Keith took the chance to pull some of the covers that he’d kicked away back over Lance’s sleeping form.

“I’m really sorry to call—how are they?”

Shiro smiled grimly. “They’re alright. What’s up?”

“Well- It’s just- Pidge, she wasn’t at breakfast, you know? And that’s nothing unusual but now she’s missed lunch too and last I knew she was playing with that bit of asteroid, and Yellow’s getting worried because he hasn’t heard from Green in a while... and I tried the doors, but she’s got them programmed to keep me out. A bio scanner popped out from the wall and everything. She’s not answering on her comms, and Allura and Coran had no luck with the door either-”

“Hunk, slow down.” He stopped as he felt a warm hand on his knee, and turned to look at Keith.

“Go. I’ve got him.” Keith looked down at Lance, and then back up at Shiro.

“Can you come and try?” Hunk continued, “If she’s got it programmed to keep specific people out, and that’s gotta mean there are people she will let in, right? As our Fearless Leader you’re probably the best bet, I guess I’m hoping that she’ll listen to you?”

Shiro nodded slowly. “I’m on my way.”

Keith slid closer to Shiro, and offered his own leg as a suitable new pillow for Lance rather than Shiro’s own. Not wanting to wake Lance, they were as careful as they could be, but in the end it didn’t matter how little they disturbed the sleeping Paladin, Keith had had to let go of his hand.

“Mmhm?” Lance groaned, and Keith brushed some hair out of his face.

“Shiro’s just heading out. Go back to sleep.”

Lance shook his head, and slowly pulled up an arm to rub at his eyes. “Not Shiro”

Shiro had just reached the door and turned back, torn.

“I’m right here, Lance, it’s alright,” Keith soothed. “You can go back to sleep.”

“No-,” he argued, clearly still half asleep, “Not Shiro, you.”

Keith looked up at Shiro, confusion in his gaze. Shiro shrugged, his voice quiet. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, I promise.”

Keith nodded, and Shiro left the room, wondering as he broke into a smooth jog what Katie had gotten herself into this time.

---

“Pidge?” He tried to get the Green Paladin on the comms as he ran “Katie? Please respond.”

It took him only a few minutes to reach Green’s bay, and he nodded at the three members of Team Voltron gathered there as he swiftly ran his hand over the door lock.

A light on a small knob protruding from the wall blinked red, and Shiro assumed this was the bio sensor Hunk had mentioned.

Nothing happened with the door.

He looked at the controls, frowned, and waved his hand over the locking pad again.

Still nothing.

“Oh no.” Hunk muttered. “Oh no. What if she forgot to let anyone in?”

Shiro looked at the pad again before turning around to speak. “Alright, let’s not panic. There might not even be anything wrong-“

A spark of concern from Black was more than enough to make him think otherwise. He sent a curious thought after it and received nothing but confusion in return. Black wasn’t sure what was up, but they knew something wasn’t *right*.

“Alright so something is wrong,” he amended. “Hunk, Coran, neither of you can crack it?”



“Well, Number five is pretty smart-“

“She layered the castle coding with redundancies her own...” Hunk interrupted. “Coran and Allura would also have to learn the language... Maybe eventually we could crack it, but not anytime soon.” Hunk sighed sadly. “So that’s a no.”

Shiro nodded, and grimaced as he turned around, powering up his arm to cut through the door. “Alright, stand back-“

“Wait!” Lance tumbled down the hall into the antechamber, still in his pyjamas, Keith not far behind.

“Lance-?” Shiro asked, confused.

“I tried to tell you before, but neither of you listened. To be fair I was half asleep and barely thinking properly, let alone speaking properly, but still.” He shrugged, and gestured to the Red Paladin. “Keith?”

“Yes, that’s Keith.” Shiro confirmed slowly.

Lance groaned, and Keith filled in the blanks.

“No, Lance seems to think that Pidge will let me in.”

“She will,” Lance interjected.

Shiro was utterly baffled, but nodded. “Yeah sure, have a go at it. I think Coran would prefer if we keep the door in one piece.”

In the corner, the redhead nodded emphatically.

Keith walked forwards nervously, and waved his hand over the lock.

There was a blink of green and the door opened wide. Keith stared at it in shock for a moment before stepping through, then he turned and waited for Lance to join him.

Strangely, the Blue Paladin didn’t move. “If she programmed it to let you in, then obviously she only wants to talk to you,” Lance clarified, as though it were the most obvious thing in the universe. “

We’ll be in the lounge when you guys are done.” Lance grabbed Hunk’s hand, and started dragging him in the opposite direction, only pausing to throw a “I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Shiro!” over his shoulder.

Wait- Lance wasn’t going to come? Keith was absolutely lost. What had just happened? How did Lance know that Pidge wanted to talk to Keith? And what had he meant by-

Shiro took a step forwards to join Keith on the other side of the door-

It slammed shut in Shiro’s face.

Oh. That’s what he had meant.

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Summary

Pidge and Keith talk. About stuff.

## Chapter Notes

Kit-Kat indulgence because we always need more.

I really am sorry about how long this took. Truth be told I had the edits back months ago, (thanks Dragon\_Stone!) so the delay is all on me :D

Put it down to not wanting this fic to be done, combined with the fact that my life has been hella busy and crazy lately?

I also want to thank everyone who's been commenting and leaving kudos- the emails that come with your responses are truly joyous occasions, and reading your lovely comments always makes life that much better.

On tags: other than the usual, in this chapter there is a reference to survivor's guilt, and a reference to believing that one deserves pain as penance.

One more chapter after this.

Are you ready for this segment to be done?

Enjoy!

---

Pidge and Hunk had spent the rest of the afternoon tinkering with ideas for a new type of shielding system. The mineral that Keith had so recklessly attacked the day before had some serious potential as a defensive weapon.

If the Lion's hulls could be lined with this mineral, would any shot that hit them be redirected, and then short out all of the electrical systems within a limited radius? Like an EMP in a paint job?

What if they could somehow increase that radius? Was the radius of damage done by an impact determined by the force of the impact on the mineral? They would have to run some tests...

Did the substance work only one way- back in the direction of which it was hit? Like a laser beam on a reflective surface? Or did the impact explode back in all directions? Like... well, like an EMP?

Most importantly though; was whether they could they find a way to protect the lions, and the castle, from the effects of this substance. Was there something that could negate its effects or disturb them, allowing the inhabitants of the castle to both make use of the mineral as a weaponized shield, and to protect against it's effects so that they would never end up in a situation like earlier?

There were so many options, and so much potential...

After Lance had woken up from the mishap in the lions, and they'd reassured themselves of his relative wellbeing, the Green and Yellow Paladins had started theorizing.

After dinner, they'd started testing.

At some point, Hunk had wandered off. Probably to bed, Pidge thought, because really, he was the only one of them who had any common sense at that point.

At some point, Pidge moved her tinkering and experimenting into Green's hangar, she wanted to see how they could interface the shield they'd rigged up with the Lion's tech.

At some point, her stomach had growled, and she'd growled right back—

At least...

That was what she planned to tell anyone, if anyone should happen to ask her what she'd been doing all evening.

It would hold up to scrutiny-  
mostly.

If they got through her locked door- which wasn't likely- she had it all planned it out. That's what she'd tell them. It was the truth after all. Up until about an hour ago. It wouldn't be too hard to stretch.

Then Keith showed up, and her whole plan glitched into nonsense. She caught sight of his unruly hair and somehow tentative, yet confident posture, and her first emotion was relief. He really was fine. They really had found them.

It hadn't been long after she'd moved her science and small explosions into Green's hangar when a tablet had caught her eye. *The* tablet, the one with the videos on it. She couldn't help it; her brain needed a break from the routines it was running and a certain distraction was *right there...*

She really shouldn't have even thought about it, let alone power the tablet up and scroll through the directory.

Hunk and Shiro would say it was something about survivors guilt. A need to punish herself. Maybe they were right, on some level. It had taken her much too long to find them. She did deserve the pain.

And there was so much pain.

Enough that it was hard for her to watch the footage even when she consciously made the decision

to tune out her emotions. This time though, she'd been exhausted before she started, and she'd just wanted to see if she could document how much of the toxin they'd been given, how often, how it had affected them in the cell... Nothing big- she'd told herself, but she couldn't do anything to help them now, maybe there was something else in the footage, something she'd missed before, there had to be something in those videos.

She had to do something.

"Pidge?" Keith called out hesitantly, "Pidge, are- are you alright?"

She scowled and slid out from under the workstation she was hiding under. She shoved her tablet behind her back in a rough motion as she took a seat against the wall, and felt the stinging that meant her puffy eyes were on full display.

"I'm fine," she grumbled.

Keith frowned. "No, you're not."

"Why wouldn't I be?" she challenged

"Well, because no one's heard from you in hours, and none of the other Lions can contact Green," he replied smoothly. "This is you we're talking about. There's no way that was an accident."

She'd never known him to be that observant, although his instincts had always been something to watch out for. "Really?" She said with a poorly feigned interest. "It must be a side effect of the shielding I've been working on..." She closed her eyes, trying to create a visual narrative that might work for Keith. Maybe if he believed her, he'd leave and let her be. "Yeah, Green says that she can't hear the others," she lied, "but that she knew it couldn't last forever. Also, she was kinda enjoying the quiet."

In the back of her mind, Green sighed sadly.

Keith rolled his eyes and sat down against the wall next to Pidge. "Typical," he sighed. "But that doesn't explain why you didn't answer your comms." At least he had the dignity not to stare at the tear marks down her face.

Katie kept her eyes on the hangar wall across from them, trying not to let it slip that that she'd intentionally turned off her comms herself, "Hm. The shielding must be blocking that too." She offered feebly

He grimaced, clearly able to hear the others in his ear. "Just yours? Not mine? That's one hell of a shield."

She glared at him. "It's a work in progress."

"It's a work in progress that has even the lions worried about your safety, Pidge, after everything that's happened..."

She grumbled. "I just- I wanted some time to myself, is that alright?"

Keith shrugged.

"What?" She dared him. "I can see the tiny gears in your head working. Spill."

He bit his lip, and placed his hands on either side of his legs as if to reposition himself. Instead he

reached behind her and snatched the tablet she'd hid behind her back.

"Hey!" She made a grab at it, but he easily held it out of her reach. "Stupid short arms," Pidge cursed under her breath, followed by a sad, "Keith, please, don't."

He sighed and returned the tablet. Defeated, she put it in her lap. He'd known anyway- clearly, and now that he knew, that she knew, that he knew, there really was no point in pretending any longer.

"Why do you watch it? The security footage?" he asked, his tone empty, emotionless.

She shrugged. "I want to help. You guys lived it- the least I can do is watch it. Figure out if there's anything I missed the first time-"

"There isn't," he said quickly, cutting her off.

"We don't know that for sure. I watched it too quickly. And you both said that neither of your memories are that reliable, and there could be something-"

"They're reliable enough for this. Pidge, all the footage is, is pain. I get-" he shuddered slightly, and Pidge was very careful not to speak, or even move, while Keith found his way to what he wanted to say. "I know that we can't... delete it—not completely" Keith said eventually, "but I've been meaning to talk to you about something."

"What?"

"We don't want people watching it. Shiro in particular."

She gave a quick nod. "I get that."

"Good. Would it be possible to take it off the castle systems?"

"Why? I've sealed it up, there's no way Shiro's getting through my firewalls."

"Maybe." Keith played with his glove. "But you can get through your firewalls."

"Of course I-" Wait. Oh, that made sense. Smart boy. "Oh." She muttered softly, "You want me to stop watching them too." She closed her eyes and sighed.

Keith nodded. "We both do."

What was she doing? Here Keith was, without Lance, trying to stop her— to help her— when she was supposed to be helping them, not the other way 'round.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, we are."

Again with the 'we'. Katie wasn't sure if she was more reassured, or pained to realize that they did that so often now.

Wiping the back of her hand across her face, she nodded. "Okay."

"Thanks Pidge."

"But on one condition."

“What?” he asked nervously.

“You guys talk to us; let us help.”

“Oh.” He shrugged. “Yeah, I have a feeling that’s what Lance is planning now anyways. We’re supposed to go meet them when you’re ready.”

She nodded. “That’s good.” She bit her lip, “Are they- mad?”

“What?” Keith asked, clearly confused, “Why would anyone be mad?”

Katie rolled her eyes at him and pointedly looked around at Green.

“Oh, no. No one’s mad, just, well, understandably worried. Shiro was ready to cut open the hangar door.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. If Lance and I hadn’t gotten there when we did, you’d be talking to Shiro and Coran about replacing it.”

She grimaced. “Oops.”

Keith couldn’t help but chuckle. “‘Oops’. Yeah, that about covers it.”

Katie smacked his arm. “Shut it.”

“Why me though?” He asked suddenly. Self consciously.

Why had she programmed it so that only he could get in the door? That was easy. “Because I knew you wouldn’t come in unless it was actually important.”

He shrugged, nodding. “Maybe next time leave a list of who gets to go in? Or keep an emergency line open?” He grimaced. “What if Lance hadn’t figured it out? With everything that’s happened, they’re gonna worry.” He took a shaky breath. “We’re all gonna worry.”

“Yeah. I know.” She hung her head. It had been reckless of her, and she wasn’t blind to that. “I-I guess I wasn’t thinking straight. I can’t help but wonder if my dad or Matt were- or even *are* locked up somewhere like you guys were- and I just feel like- Ugh Keith, you know me. I need to do something.”

Keith stood and held his hand out to help her up. “Yeah, “ he said, “I get that feeling, but I also do *know you*. You’ll figure out some genius way to spend your time that will be incredibly useful, and none of us will understand a word of it.”

She took his hand and stood, rolling her eyes. “Yeah probably,” she said dryly. “Thanks.”

“And your dad and Matt- we’re going to find them. I have a feeling Matt is going to make an epic addition to our space family. If he’s even half as savage as you, the Galra are done for.” He smirked, and Katie couldn’t keep back her chuckle.

“He’s not quite as savage; but he’ll do in a pinch,” she grinned, “nothing like an annoying younger sister to keep you on your toes.”

Keith nodded, and reached out to ruffle her hair as they walked down Green’s ramp. “I can’t wait to meet him.”

She glared as she shook her hair back into it's normal disarray, then grinned. "Me too."

As she shut down her equipment, Pidge played over a detail in her mind that had been bugging her, and turned suddenly to Keith for clarification.

"What do you mean Lance figured it out? That seems odd to mention."

"What do you mean?"

"You said Lance figured out the door- like it was a riddle, or something." She frowned, confused. "Didn't you just try everyone?"

Keith pursed his lips. "Well, I guess we did- except for Lance." Keith actually gave a small smile. "He was half asleep and mumbling; Shiro and I didn't know what to make of it. Coran had called for Shiro's help with the door. He left, and Lance woke up really confused that I was there." He bit his lip. "Lance dragged me to the hangars, and he kept saying that 'Pidge needed me'. Keith shrugged. "And then the door opened for me."

"That's strange."

"I know. You may be underestimating how well he knows you- he even warned Shiro that the door would close in his face." Keith chuckled at the memory.

Katie frowned. "Wait- He what?"

"He told Shiro to watch out, and then a few seconds later the hangar door slammed right in front of him."

Pidge frowned. "Interesting."

"Pidge..." Keith started, "Spill."

"It's just- as much as I'd love to take credit- and believe me, I would-, that wasn't me."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't tell the program to keep Shiro out, only to let you in. Technically as soon as you opened the door, the program should have deactivated."

Keith shrugged. "Strange?"

"Well yes, that's kinda my point. But now I'm more interested how Lance knew it was going to happen. I know he notices a lot more that he lets on, but..." Pidge frowned.

After a moment, the confusion in her features dissipated, replaced with the peace that came with figuring out a particularly sticky problem.

"Oh. Well, that actually makes sense."

"Pidge?" Keith asked nervously.

"What if... this has something to do with the cognitive recalibration we've been so worried about? The Toxin?" she clarified needlessly.

"The-"

She watched understanding light up his eyes.

“You think?” he asked.

“I mean, statistically speaking it’s just as likely as anything else. We should see if he’s made any other weird observations before—“

“The Lions.” Keith’s words were soundless, but Katie understood regardless. “Yesterday,” he continued, his voice stronger, “before that nightmare of a flight, he knew something was going to go wrong. He even—“ Keith paused, and had to take in a long breath to steady himself. “Oh God-Pidge, he even asked me not to go rushing into anything without him. And then I did—“

Pidge placed a supporting hand on his arm. “Keith, breathe.”

He nodded, but still struggled. She slapped her comms, turning them on, and opened a direct line to Lance in a heartbeat.

“Lance, talk to Keith. *Now*,” she ordered, and slapped her comms again, turning it off.

She tried to breathe as slowly as she could, to be an anchor for Keith, and it was only a moment later she saw his eyes lose focus as he listened to something—

—no, not something; Lance’s voice, in his ear. After a minute or so, he gestured to her to continue.

“Good?”

He nodded.

“I need to talk to him,” Katie said slowly, her words cautious. “To everyone.”

Keith nodded again. “Yeah. They’re already in the lounge.” He took in a long breath. “Almost like he knew.”

“Right.” she replied nervously.

“You should really turn your comms back, back on.”

She flushed, and reached up to do just that.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter Summary

Finally time for The Talk. :)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hunk ushered Keith and Pidge into the lounge. Allura and Coran had claimed a sunken sofa across from the door, and Lance was already sitting in what was quickly becoming Keith's usual spot across from them. Keith instead sat in Lance's, and leaned comfortably against the Blue Paladin's shoulder. He grabbed for Lance's hand, and smiled as Lance eagerly took it. Pidge curled into a ball on Keith's other side, furiously tapping away at her tablet, avoiding nearly everyone's gaze, almost vibrating with a strange energy. It came close to distracting Shiro from the red around her eyes, but not quite.

Shiro visibly relaxed as he saw Pidge. "Pidge, is everything alright? Are you okay?"

She nodded quickly. "I'm good, Shiro. Sorry for scaring you- I was testing voltage differentials while calibrating Green's system to potentially work with the substance we encountered yesterday, and I was so caught up that I didn't realize that certain systems had been so adversely affected by the mere presence of the substance in the first place-" she paused, and rephrased. "I was so focused on fixing one problem that I didn't even notice another one manifest."

Shiro's face was blank with confusion for only a second before he nodded "Just don't let it happen again," he asked gently, "Okay?"

Pidge nodded emphatically, and Hunk narrowed his eyes. If that's really what she was doing, then she'd gotten a lot done after he went to bed- which also meant she hadn't slept yet. He shook his head lovingly, and added 'get Pidge to sleep' to his mental "To Do" list.

Shiro raised his eyebrows at Lance, as if to ask him if he was ready. Lance nodded back, and just like that the team meeting started.

"This-" Shiro paused, "this won't be easy, for any of us. But this is something that we need to do before any of us," he looked pointedly at Lance and Keith, "can move on."

"First I need to apologize to both of you for pushing you so quickly yesterday." Shiro took a deep breath. "I'll admit, the intel on the toxin you were exposed to worried me, and it caused me to act and make decisions without completely thinking the situation through. I worry now that this may have hurt you more in the long run, instead of helping you.

"Second, even though I promised myself that I wouldn't, I prioritized your health according to Voltron, rather than by what you needed. If treating things and doing things the way we normally would have is the best answer to this toxin, then addressing the trauma you two have been through should have been what happened first.

"You are pilots, and Paladins, it's true. But I need you both to know that these are not the only things we value about you. They're not even the most important. I don't care if you're flying with me or talking with me, what matters the most is that you are a part of my life, and I don't think

there's a person on board this castle who would say any differently."

Murmurs of assent and soft smiles came from all around.

"Now, though, I'm going to offer anyone who wants the chance to talk about something- anything at all, surrounding the events of the past week or so. Please, go ahead."

To everyone's surprise it was Keith who spoke first.

"I need you all to know something." He pursed his lips together, and continued. "It's something he keeps denying and I'm getting sick of it. Lance is a hero. I wouldn't be alive without him, regardless of any toxin."

"Keith-" Lance tried to intervene-

"No, please, let me finish."

Lance nodded, biting his lip.

"I suppose- the Uniloo- they were expecting the toxin to affect both of us the way it affected me." Keith clearly saw their looks of confusion at his comment, and continued. "Like Coran explained when he first found traces of the toxin-"

"The effects are hallucinations mostly. I got some of those too," Lance picked up the conversation, not taking away from what Keith was saying, but adding to it in a way that Keith couldn't, "but mine weren't nearly as bad. They- they would ask him questions, and he wouldn't even know where he was, or /when/ he was-"

"So you distracted them." Keith turned to face Lance, his expression partly thankful, partly annoyed at his self sacrificing habits.

"I couldn't let them beat you when you didn't even understand what was going on-"

"I wouldn't have remembered it though. You, on the other hand, /do/ remember being tortured." Keith, replied, ever the pragmatist even as he winced around the words.

"Even if I'd known that, it wouldn't have changed a thing about how I acted." Lance said plainly.

"Yeah, I know." Keith smiled kindly; sadly, and his voice sounded like it was on the verge of breaking. "I hate that you got hurt, but I need the others to recognise that you got hurt trying to protect me. I need them see you like I do."

Lance shrugged. "I don't regret it. And I hope you won't ask me to."

Keith shook his head messily. "No, it's a part of who you are. You're a hero who puts everyone else before yourself. All I'm saying is that maybe you should put yourself first for a little while."

Shiro nodded and caught Lance's eye. Lance shuddered, then nodded, seemingly having made up his mind about something.

"Yeah, yeah, alright." He said softly, "I guess I'll start, then."

"Well," Keith smirked, "you know, technically, /I/ started first."

Lance scoffed. "Hardly. You just took an extra scenic route to convince me to talk. You're going after though, so get ready."

Keith rolled his eyes but nodded, and Lance took a deep breath, apparently satisfied for the time being. He held tight to Keith's hand as he started talking.

"I—" Lance started, then froze. "Ugh, just give me a sec to get this sorted in my head-hole. This is harder than I thought it would be." He leant slightly into Keith, and after a long moment he continued. "You all know that I like people; being around them, talking, physical contact. The whole chibang." He smiled faintly. "It's been brought to my attention—" he stumbled over his words. "I've noticed," Lance tried to start again, then swallowed his words and took a few breaths. "That hasn't changed, really," he insisted, his tone a touch desperate. "I still love the hugs, and the casual touching- it's just-." He gulped.

Keith suddenly, uncharacteristically, shifted so to wrap an arm around Lance's shoulders, pulling him half into his own lap. Keith didn't usually do /touch/, but with Lance now he seemed to have a different set of rules altogether. Keith rubbed his hand soothingly up and down Lance's arm, and Hunk saw that Lance's form was almost imperceptibly shuddering.

Hunk was supposed to know Lance, but he hadn't noticed—

Keith /had/, and he'd immediately taken steps to try and provide the support Lance needed.

Hunk hadn't noticed. Did that make Hunk a bad friend? He froze where he was, torn between getting up to go over and offer his best friend whatever comfort he needed, and watching in awe as Keith and Lance had yet /another/ conversation without saying a word. Hunk was happy that they were closer, he was so happy that Lance had someone who understood him on that level.

At the same time, as awful as it was, he was also a bit jealous. He and Lance used to be so in sync. Now, Hunk felt like he was missing something in his heart, knowing that their friendship would never again be what it was.

Keith took over. "We both had a rough time in that cell, but Lance took the brunt of the beatings."

Pidge flinched, Keith looked at her, and nodded slowly with understanding. Hunk held back a sigh. So she /had/ started watching the footage again. He'd hoped she wouldn't do that.

"Pulling away from you guys, its not on purpose," Lance continued. "I promise I'm not trying to hurt your feelings, I just—"

"Lance," Shiro interrupted softly before the Blue paladin could completely fall apart, "Its not your fault. They did this to you. It's your mind's natural defence mechanism to pull away, and that's okay. It will take time to get used to anticipating touches that don't hurt. Would you- would you like us to stop—"

"No!—" he replied before Shiro even finished speaking, "No," he repeated, "just- maybe—" he looked down sheepishly, "It might help if I know you're coming?" he said nervously. "Don't stop, I don't know what I'd do without hugs from you guys... I don't mean to pull away- I need you guys to know that. I don't do it on purpose- most of the time I don't even realize that it's happening- I just, I can't help it. I'm sorry!" He turned and buried his face in Keith's shoulder, and a soft sob escaped his lips

"Lance- hey, Lance." Lance slowly looked back up to Shiro at his coaxing words. "That is absolutely something we're happy to do. Remember, this isn't your fault. Whatever you need from us, anything, please, just ask."

Lance froze for a moment, then nodded shyly.

Hunk took that as an opportunity to go where he wanted to be the most- right on Lance's other side. "Can I?" he asked, nodding to the arm of the couch, and Lance nodded, pulling himself further into Keith's lap in an effort to give Hunk more space to sit. Hunk grinned and got up from where he was sitting on the floor and moved to the couch.

"Ugh, guys. You're doing it /all/ wrong," Lance complained with a smirk as they squished on the couch, but the smile of thanks he gave them was genuine. Hunk and Keith exchanged a look of amusement as Lance huffed, then proceeded to arrange them on the couch so that he could lay across their laps, his head on the armrest and his feet in Pidge's lap.

When he was finally situated to his satisfaction he gave a small sigh of content.

"Ahem."

"Pidgey?"

"Get your feet away from my face."

Lance grinned, wriggling his toes even closer to tease her, but Keith actually seemed scared of what she might do to retaliate- he was sitting right next to her after all.

"Problem, Pidgey?" Lance asked

"I /will/ bite you."

Lance started to laugh, then he froze. His features flipped from amusement to shock as he started to take her threat seriously, he scrambled around, placing his feet over the armrests where his head had just been, and resting his head instead in Keith's lap. Hunk knew there was no way he would use Pidge as a pillow after a threat like that.

Pidge smirked. "Was that so hard?"

Lance rolled his eyes "You are such a /sister/."

This time her grin had teeth.

"You guys are the best though-" he said, ignoring the predatory smirk, "you know that, right?"

The rest of the room had watched the affair with open amusement, and Hunk couldn't help but smile. "Thanks buddy. You're pretty awesome too. I'm really glad you're back."

He didn't say "I'm glad you're okay," He couldn't, not when it wasn't true. Lance was back though, and that was what really mattered.

"Both of you," Hunk amended, looking over at Keith. The Red Paladin looked away self-consciously, but Hunk knew he appreciated the sentiment anyways.

There was a strange silence, not awkward but patiently waiting for a few minutes after that, then Keith looked up to meet each of their eyes individually. He took a deep breath, and spoke.

"I was never much one for physical contact. You guys have- changed that a bit, but if you could hold off on overload of touches for a while, that- that would probably be best. I don't want to hurt anyone."

Hunk nodded, meanwhile Lance looked quickly up to Keith, eyes wide.

Keith frowned, then gave him a small smile. "Of course it's ok, it's you. You're different." He responded to the silent panic, and Lance exhaled, relieved. Keith pulled him slightly closer to reinforce his words with actions; and Lance hummed happily.

"That being said- there is something you should know. I-I used to get flashbacks when I was younger, which would- often- lead into... panic attacks."

What? Hunk's heart went out to young Keith, a kid who had to deal with these things; because he really wasn't much older than a kid now.

"Uh- Shiro," Keith continued, "Shiro helped me out when we first met. We figured out what would trigger the flashbacks and how to get through them; even if I couldn't get to him or he wasn't there... it took longer but I was eventually able to handle them on my own. Actually, by the time the Kerberos mission came along, an incident was a rare event."

The room was full of held breaths and bitten lips in sympathy.

"Ever since coming to the castle I haven't had a problem. It seems that being away from earth was actually a good thing for me. It got me away from things that reminded me of that time of my life."

Hunk nodded, and he was the only one that made sense. It was awful, but it made sense.

Keith took a breath. "They've come back," he said bluntly. "And if- If you see me and think I'm in the middle of one- you- please don't touch me; but do talk to me. Even just having a familiar voice to focus on and pull me out of my head can help; either until Lance, or Shiro, can get there, or I until I tell you I'm alright?"

The Red Paladin was almost vibrating with nerves at this point, and he burrowed his face in Lance's hair to escape the looks even Hunk could feel from all around the room.

"Keith," Allura started, "that was very brave of you. Please, if you need anything, do not hesitate to ask."

Shiro smiled at him proudly, and Hunk gave him a nod of encouragement

"Thanks," whispered Keith.

Hunk didn't quite understand how he did it, but Coran stepped in with a completely pointless- yet humorous tale that effectively lightened the feel of everyone in the room. When he was done talking, Coran grabbed Allura, indicated that something needed to be done somewhere, and dragged her out of the room, leaving the Paladins with a little time to themselves.

Shiro looked to be just about itching for something, and as he stood up and approached the couch, it was made apparent what he wanted.

"Lance, I'm sorry to disturb you, but if Keith's okay with it-" he dipped his head slightly, looking almost /shy/. "I could use a hug."

Lance's eyes lit up and he hurried to scramble over completely onto Hunk's lap, allowing Keith to stand and then sliding down into his seat as he vacated it. Keith then proceeded to desperately wrap arms around Shiro's waist- tight, and Shiro brought both of his arms up protectively, one around Keith's shoulders and the other cupping the back of his head.

"I am so, so proud of you," Hunk heard Shiro mutter. "You are so strong."

---

When Allura and Coran returned with trays of a hot beverage that Shiro seriously hoped was the one Hunk had likened to earth's own Apple Cider, the Paladins were already sitting on the floor in an almost circle shape— at Lance's insistence. Shiro looked up as the Alteans walked in and smiled, inviting them to join the Paladins on the floor.

Careful not to spill their treasure, they did so, and the warm mugs were eagerly passed around the group.

"So," Katie announced as they were all settled once more, "I- well, Keith and I, we might have... found something."

Shiro frowned slightly. In that short amount of time they'd spent in Green, what could they have found? He nodded at her to continue.

"Lance," she said, turning to face him, "earlier, with the door to Green's hangar," she prompted, "How did you know?"

Lance frowned. "How did I know what?"

"How did you know that I'd programmed the door to only let Keith in? How did you know it would close in Shiro's face?"

Lance shrugged. "I know you don't like people interrupting you when you're working- if the door hadn't let Shiro or Allura or Coran in, there was no way it would let me or Hunk in. The only logical choice was Keith."

"But how did you know it would let anyone in at all?"

"I- I guess I didn't?" Lance shrunk back slightly, and Keith took his hand in his own.

"How did you know that the door would slam on Shiro? I didn't program it to do that, so what made you so sure of it?"

"Lucky guess, I guess?" Lance bit his lip, and his breaths quickened slightly.

"Pidge—" Shiro interrupted, not liking the look of unease on Lance's face. Shiro knew that look. Like he was being interrogated all over again.

"But how did you know?"

Lance shrugged, and his brow knotted as he tried to steady his breathing

"But Lance, how could you know?"

Lance's voice level rose to match hers "Why does it matter? I just did- okay?"

"Pidge!" Keith commanded.

Katie seemed to realize what had happened and leant back suddenly, biting her lip. "Oh god- I-I'm sorry, Lance—"

Lance shook his head, "No, it's fine, I'm good, I'm good." As if to prove himself, he inhaled

deeply as he leant back into Keith, artificially evening out his breaths.

Keith threw a betrayed look at Pidge, and she cowered back slightly, knowing she had gone too far.

“Pidge- what is the meaning of this?” Allura asked, halfway to standing and getting between them physically, clearly concerned over the events unfolding in front of her as much as Shiro was.

Katie took a deep breath. “We- Keith and I, we think we figured out what the long-term effects of the toxin on Lance’s brain are.

Oh.

“Oh.” Lance voiced, his tone devoid of energy, and Shiro wasn’t sure if the boy was more scared or anxious to hear what Katie had to say.

Keith nodded at Katie, then turned to the bBlue Paladin, speaking softly- but the others were so quiet that there was no trouble in hearing what he said.

“Lance- do you remember yesterday, you had a really bad feeling about flying the lions?”

Lance nodded, obviously not sure where Keith was leading.

“And then you knew about the door, and then even not so long ago I think, maybe even when Pidge threatened to bite you, or when you insisted we had to sit on the floor so that nothing would spill even before we knew that Coran and Allura were bringing drinks?”

“Well what else would they have been-“

“Lance.”

Lance nodded. “Yeah I remember.”

“We think you can kinda- well,” he took a breath, “know the future?” Keith finished, his tone matter-of-fact.

“Ohh? Interesting,” Coran supplied; “yes, I suppose that makes sense.”

“It does?” Allura prompted.

“Precognition is simply an advanced form of pattern recognition. Lance has always been unusually observant for a human, the toxin has allowed for his brain to re-calibrate itself to encourage this process, to make it instinctual.”

“So his brain was already making these connections-?”

“Not on nearly the same scale, but yes.”

“Pidge?” Shiro turned to their brainiac for further explanation.

“Alright. Say you were to go and scratch Chulac on the head. What would he do?”

Shiro frowned, not sure where this was going, but replied nonetheless. “He’d probably roll over onto his back for a belly scratch?”

“Right. Based on your past experiences with Chulac, you know what the most likely outcome of events will be, and you can plan for it. In other words, you kinda know the future.”

“Alright.” Shiro thought he understood where she was going with this.

“Lance already was pretty observant, it’s part of what makes him such a good people person, and strategist.”

Shiro nodded.

“Theoretically, the more he knows, the more he observes, the more he could predict. The amount of knowledge it would take to predict things on such a scale would normally overwhelm the human brain, but the Lions change all the rules,” Katie continued. “We’ll have to check for exactly this—now that we know what we’re looking for, but it’s likely that the toxin affected his brain in a way that allows him to subconsciously intake more information than is possible for a human, or that he consciously registers. So his brain takes in all this extra information and then spits out a product—

“Foreknowledge, of what is /going/ to happen,” Allura finished for her. Surprised at the interruption, Pidge looked over, and nodded.

Shiro looked back over to Lance, and found the Blue Paladin more contemplative than he thought he would.

“Lance?” Shiro prompted.

“I have a superpower,” he said bluntly, and Keith groaned. “Guys— I,” he paused, “I, have a /superpower/.”

“Well, I wouldn’t call it a ‘super power’, so much as a superior ‘ability’?” Pidge interjected.

“Schemantics, Pidgey. All that shit we had to go through...” He giggled. “Keith! Keith!” He tapped the Red Paladin’s arm excitedly. “I get a superpower!”

“Lance, ironically, I knew before you did,” Keith reminded him, but Lance didn’t seem to care.

“Ooh, I wonder how far ahead I’ll know stuff? I wonder if I’ll have visions? Or hear things?”

“Have you seen anything yet, my boy?” Coran asked.

“Well no- but maybe I will later?”

“There’s always a chance!” Coran replied at the same time as Katie said:

“Nope”.

Lance looked back and forth between them, confused. “Well?” he asked for clarification.

“Visions are—” Keith started to answer, then stopped at the shocked silence before continuing nervously. “Visions are a very- fictionalized version of how premonitions could work. It makes them easy to show, or describe- visually, and easier for an audience to understand.” He finished quietly. “Visions are essentially pop-culture’s influence.”

Katie turned to give him a smirk. “I knew we’d see your inner nerd some day.” He reddened, and she turned back to Lance. “But he’s right. Not that visions are impossible, but unless you’ve had one yet, I don’t think they’re at all likely. It’s not like a memory; you can’t call up an image that your visual cortex hasn’t already experienced. You could potentially imagine it to some degree of accuracy, but it wouldn’t be a ‘vision’ in the way you’re thinking.”

“Oh.” Lance looked slightly downtrodden, like he’d been given a toy only to have it taken away.



“But that doesn’t mean what you know as a result of this new talent is any less valid,” Shiro said confidently. “Just because you can’t /see/ it, doesn’t mean it isn’t /real/.”

“But- how am I supposed to know?” Lance asked, for the first time seeming a little afraid. “How am I supposed to know the difference between something that will happen, or something I’m just afraid of happening? Or hoping to happen?”

“I trust you,” Shiro replied, and the others nodded in agreement. “It might take a bit; but you’ll figure it out, I know it.”

“Every skill takes practice,” Allura added, “trial and error.”

“But what if I mess up?”

“We will not hold it against you. You are just learning now, none of us expect you to have perfect control and interpretation over it immediately,” she reassured him.

Lance nodded slowly. “Oh. yeah, I guess that makes sense.” He smiled shyly. “I’ll work hard at it, I promise—”

Shiro’s heart clenched. What had this pure boy ever done to deserve the pain he’d endured? All he wanted was to protect and help his friends, his family, and the universe kept knocking him down.

Lance was right. This special thing, this ability that made him so unique, more so even than being a Paladin of Voltron—

This superpower was /owed/ to him.

## Chapter End Notes

And the universe pays its debts.

Ahh hehehe I’ve been waiting ages for that one :)

God I’m sorry guys, I’ve had this sitting waiting to be posted for over a year. :-O

I had planned at one point to have a whole series- even have a few drabbles started- but unfortunately the muse has taken me quite somewhere else and I’m not sure if anything will ever come of it.

Feel free to message me if you have questions though, I’m more than happy to answer what I can, and spoilers be damned :-P

On another note a friend has started a new online publication and if anyone who reads this wants to really be awesome go check it out and maybe subscribe to future editions?

<http://www.mockingowlroost.com/>

I love you all, I really do.

On another note if anyone is fond of the Batfamily, (or of just general Dick Grayson angst) let me promise you, I have a treat in the works... That's my only promise though, way am I gonna promise a date :-)

Stay safe everyone. Take care of your mental health. Go for walks, wear masks, and just avoid all contact with other human beans at the moment? Cool? Thanks.

<3 What a brilliant ride. You guys are amazing.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!